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Dostoevsky's Storm and Stress

Notes from Underground and the Psychological Foundations of Utopia

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Lay Summary

The goal of this dissertation is to combine philosophical and literary scholarship to arrive at a new interpretation of Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*. In this novel, Dostoevsky argues against the Russian socialists of the early 1860s, and attacks their ideal of a socialist utopia in particular. Dostoevsky's argument is obscure and difficult to understand, but it seems to depend upon the way he understands the interaction between psychology and politics, or, in other words, the way in which he thinks the health of a society depends upon the psychological health of its members. It is usually thought that Dostoevsky's problem with socialism is that it curtails individual liberties to an unacceptable degree, and that the citizens of a socialist utopia would be frustrated by the lack of freedom. I maintain instead that his argument in *Notes from Underground* is that the socialists misunderstand and underestimate the psychological importance of spirituality: they fail to consider that people have an innate desire to feel like they are not merely animals, and to feel that human beings have a unique spiritual dignity.

By placing the novel in a broader historical context, I show that this new approach can be illuminated and justified with reference to German philosophy and literature, and the works of Friedrich Schiller in particular. The influence of Schiller on Dostoevsky is well known, but it has not been sufficiently appreciated by those interested in his social and political philosophy. I argue that *Notes from Underground* should be seen as a revival of psychological themes from the *Sturm und Drang* (Storm and Stress) movement to which Schiller contributed, and, crucially, that these themes are the linchpin of Dostoevsky's criticism of the socialists. This results in a new perspective on Dostoevsky's stature as a philosopher, his place in the history of philosophy and literature, and on his attitude towards individual liberty.

Abstract

Notes from Underground is Dostoevsky's most intense examination of the fundamental psychological basis of society and politics, and was conceived as a polemical response to the utopian socialism of Nihilists like Nikolai Chernyshevsky. This dissertation presents a new interpretation of *Notes from Underground*, and in particular its argument against utopian socialism, based on a comparison with the German *Sturm und Drang* movement and related literary and philosophical texts. It is usually assumed that Dostoevsky's problem with utopian socialism is that it curtails individual liberties to an unacceptable degree, since human beings have an innate need for freedom. I argue that the appeal of this reading rests on the ambiguity of the word "freedom," and that when its conceptual foundations are clarified, it leads to serious inconsistencies in Dostoevsky's social thought. The need for an entirely new approach thereby becomes evident. Having examined and clarified the meaning of relevant portions of the novel, I find that for Dostoevsky it is not the need for freedom that renders utopian socialism psychologically inadequate, but the need for deeper spiritual fulfilment.

By placing the novel in its broader historical context, I show that this new approach can be illuminated and justified with reference to German philosophy and literature, and the works of Friedrich Schiller in particular. The influence of Schiller on Dostoevsky is well known, but it has not been sufficiently appreciated by those interested in his social and political philosophy. I argue that *Notes from Underground* should be seen as a revival of psychological themes from the *Sturm und Drang* movement to which Schiller contributed, and, crucially, that these themes are the linchpin of Dostoevsky's polemic against utopian socialism. The *Sturm und Drang* movement was a reaction against the demystification of human nature by Enlightenment philosophy; its anti-heroes represented the psychological and spiritual dangers of this demystification and the lack of spiritual fulfilment it entailed. Dostoevsky, I maintain, draws on these insights to argue that any ideology that rejects the spiritual needs of humanity, including utopian socialism, will lead to the dire psychological consequences illustrated extensively in *Notes from Underground*. Overall, I present an original reappraisal of Dostoevsky's novel that sheds new light on this crucial intersection of his political, psychological, philosophical and religious thought.

No, there are times when it is not possible to turn society, or even one generation, towards the beautiful, so long as it is not shown the depths of its present abasement; there are times when one may not even speak of the sublime and beautiful, if the way and roads to it for everyone are not clear as day.¹

“Underground, underground, poet of the underground,” our feuilletonists have been repeating over and over again, as if this were something derogatory to me. Silly fools, it is my glory, for that’s where the truth lies.²

¹ Gogol, 1969: 109.

² Dostoevsky, 1969: 426.

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Part 1

Chapter 1: Introduction

1. The Polemical Context

Notes from Underground was published in 1864 in the journal *Epoch*, which was edited by Dostoevsky and (before his death) his brother Mikhail. This journal was the mouthpiece of the *pochvennichestvo* or “return to the soil” movement of which, apart from the Dostoevsky brothers, critics Apollon Grigoryev and Nikolai Strakhov were notable members.¹ Generally speaking, this is the intellectual context to which the novel contributes. According to Ellen Chances, indeed, *Notes from Underground* “can be seen as a fictionalized version of *pochvennichestvo*.”² This designation can hardly be said to exhaust the significance of the work, but, as we shall see, does alert us to its central social-philosophical message. The immediate stimulus for its publication was the need to respond to the *pochvenniki*’s main ideological opponents, the Nihilists. Indeed, though it eventually emerged as a work of fiction, *Notes from Underground* was initially conceived as an article including a review of Chernyshevsky’s *What is To Be Done?*, which was published in 1863.³ The resulting novel retains this polemical purpose, though its complex literary form makes the interpretation of its contents far more difficult. As Joseph Frank remarks, Dostoevsky never again presented his readers with “so difficult a challenge to their literary and ideological acumen.”⁴ That it is universally acknowledged to occupy a pivotal position in Dostoevsky’s oeuvre, introducing and explicating themes that would preoccupy Dostoevsky throughout the

¹ Frank, 1986: 34-47.

² Chances, 2015: 275. Cf. Jackson, 1958: 25.

³ Jackson, 1958: 24; Frank, 1986: 298; Offord, 2009: 129.

⁴ Frank, 1986: 347.

remainder of his career, makes it a challenge worth embracing. To clarify its polemical meaning is the central aim of this dissertation. I take for granted that it is intended as an argument against Nihilist utopian socialism from the perspective of *pochvennichestvo*; the question I hope to answer is, how exactly should this argument be understood?

1.1. Nihilist Utopian Socialism

Before moving on to consider the novel itself, I shall first outline the social-philosophical ideologies that *Notes from Underground* argues for and against, namely *pochvennichestvo* and the Nihilist utopian socialism of Chernyshevsky's *What is To Be Done?* I shall begin with the latter.

The term “nihilism” was introduced at the end of the eighteenth century by Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, who used it to refer to what he took to be the end result of modern philosophy, culminating in the destruction of traditional cultural values, including morality and religion.⁵ Used as a label for the more radical members of the Russian intelligentsia and their followers—“the Nihilists”—it was brought into currency by Turgenev in 1862, in the novel *Fathers and Children*. Here, the character Bazarov famously refers to himself as a Nihilist and declares that his vocation is to undermine the existing foundations of Russian culture, to prepare the way for a more rational and scientific mode of life—in effect, to deliberately foster the cultural upheavals feared by philosophers like Jacobi.⁶ Among the most important of the actual Nihilists were Chernyshevsky himself, as well as Dmitry Pisarev and Nikolai Dobrolyubov (both of whom we shall encounter again below). As an intellectual movement, Nihilism was only one phase in the development of the radical intelligentsia in the nineteenth century, localized predominantly in the 1860s, though not every radical

⁵ More on this in Chapters 6 and 8.

⁶ More on this in Chapter 10.

intellectual active at that time can be considered a Nihilist.⁷ Despite individual variations, the basic features of the Nihilist ideology were: *scientism* or *rationalism*, according to which all beliefs that cannot be derived from the natural science of the day, not excepting the tenets of morality, aesthetic taste and religion, should be rejected; and *materialism*, according to which humans are nothing more than clever animals, and all cultural values that do not pertain directly to the satisfaction of this animal nature—that is, bodily needs—should also be rejected. The Nihilists further espoused—by way of a theory of ethics supposedly derived from these principles—a narrowly egoistic form of utilitarianism, censuring all activity that does not promote the material interests of the individual.

As I shall argue, this nihilism can fruitfully be understood as an attack on *human dignity* traditionally conceived, that is, what makes human beings special in comparison to animals and the rest of nature. Because it denies the religious doctrines that had previously been used to grant humanity a special status in the universe, and conceives of human beings in purely materialistic terms, it calls for a revaluation of the meaning of human existence itself. As we shall see, it is this core aspect of nihilism that is relevant to understanding Dostoevsky's argument against Chernyshevsky.

A note on terminology: when discussing the radical intelligentsia of the 1860s, scholars generally use the terms "nihilists" and "utopian socialists" interchangeably; James Scanlan, whose work I discuss below, also uses the term "rational egoists."⁸ In this context, all of these words refer loosely to the same group of people, but draw attention to different aspects of their views: "rational egoism" designates their ethics and theory of human behaviour, "utopian socialism" suggests the social and political dimension of their views, and "nihilism" suggests their anthropology and broader philosophical attitude. Because my focus is on Dostoevsky's argument against Chernyshevsky in particular, I shall use "Nihilism" and "utopian socialism" to refer,

⁷ Alexander Herzen, for example, shared many of the Nihilists' basic principles but did not endorse their wholesale rejection of earlier, less radical intellectual culture (see Kelly, 2016: chapter 21). More on Herzen in Chapter 9, below.

⁸ Scanlan, 2002: chapter 2.

unless otherwise specified, to the philosophy of Chernyshevsky, choosing whichever term seems most appropriate in each instance. Since “utopian socialism” is often used to refer to the views of early socialist thinkers like Charles Fourier, Victor Considerant and Henri de Saint-Simon (see page 252, below), I shall also use the term “Nihilist utopian socialism” to distinguish Chernyshevsky’s utopian socialism from other varieties, and to emphasize its nihilist philosophical foundations. Furthermore, it is sometimes necessary to distinguish *nihilism* as a general philosophical attitude from *Nihilism* understood more narrowly as the movement in Russian intellectual history to which Chernyshevsky belonged. I shall always use “Nihilism” with an uppercase “N” to refer specifically to the latter.

Now, Chernyshevsky’s utopianism was a natural outgrowth of his Nihilist philosophy, and stands in sharp contrast with Dostoevsky’s Christian utopian vision.⁹ From the doctrines of materialism and utilitarianism, he derived the idea that human happiness is ultimately a matter for natural science.¹⁰ If people are fundamentally no different from plants and animals, then it should be possible to discover the conditions under which the human organism flourishes best—even if these conditions are rather more complicated than their agricultural equivalents. Like other contractarians, Chernyshevsky assumed that the needs of the individual typically coincide with the needs of society as a whole or, in other words, that it is in the selfish interest of each individual to promote the interests of society.¹¹ Along with the French utopian socialists and with British political economists like Adam Smith, he therefore regarded the science of human flourishing as a science of economic association.¹²

A sketch of Chernyshevsky’s utopia is provided in *What is To Be Done?*, in the last of the four visionary dreams through which the heroine, Vera Pavlovna, becomes conscious of her ideals.¹³ The structures of this utopia are modelled on the Crystal Palace

⁹ Frank, 1986: 285-289; 1990: 187-201; Paperno, 1988: 210-212.

¹⁰ Chernyshevsky, 1988: 16.

¹¹ Chernyshevsky, 1988: 17.

¹² Chernyshevsky, 1988: 18.

¹³ Chernyshevsky, 1988: 359-380.

built to house the 1851 Great Exhibition in London, which—for Chernyshevsky as for Dostoevsky—represented the apotheosis of natural science in the nineteenth century.¹⁴ Sheathed in glass and aluminium, they provide their inhabitants with the perfect environmental conditions. Agricultural workers are looked after as well as the plants they are cultivating, bringing life to what was previously desert, shaded by vast movable canopies and sprinkled with mist.¹⁵ Everything is arranged for the ease and efficiency of manual labour; with strong nerves and constitutions, the populace actually enjoys working hard, singing songs while they toil in the fields, and can return early every day with plenty of energy for banquets, balls, good company and free sexual gratification.¹⁶

Chernyshevsky also subscribed to the doctrine of rational egoism, according to which human beings naturally pursue whatever course of action they perceive to be in their own best interests. From this it follows that once they have understood the science of human flourishing, and have recognized that Chernyshevsky's socialist utopia is the best way to guarantee their own flourishing, people will naturally want to do everything in their power to obtain it.¹⁷ In order to set this utopian scheme in motion, it would be necessary not only to attain and disseminate the necessary scientific advances, but also to clear away everything standing in its way: the natural rationality and egoism of humanity had been shackled by the prejudices of religion and romanticism, as well as the vested interests of the powers that be.¹⁸ So, while Chernyshevsky dedicated himself to enlivening the mechanism of rational egoism with scientific knowledge, he also believed that a revolution would be needed to ensure that this mechanism could have its full effect on the organization of society.¹⁹

¹⁴ Frank, 1986: 289. On the Crystal Palace in Chernyshevsky and Dostoevsky, see Katz, 2002.

¹⁵ Chernyshevsky, 1988: 274.

¹⁶ Chernyshevsky, 1988: 376-378.

¹⁷ Frank, 1986: 286f.

¹⁸ Chernyshevsky, 1988: 16.

¹⁹ Woehrlin, 1971: 262.

In brief, then, this was the most important utopian vision of the Nihilism against which the *pochvenniki* did journalistic battle, and against which the social-philosophical polemic of *Notes from Underground* is directed. I shall elaborate on the details of Chernyshevsky's views as they become relevant, and shall return to consider their conceptual foundations and context more fully in Chapters 8 and 10. I now turn to consider Dostoevsky's very different brand of utopianism.

1.2. Pochvennichestvo

Until the 1860s, when Nihilism emerged, the Russian intelligentsia was divided between the Slavophiles and the Westernizers. The former argued that Russia should protect and strengthen its traditional cultural heritage in the face of the Westernization of the gentry that had been taking place since the reforms of Peter the Great; the latter argued that Russia should embrace this Westernization. *Pochvennichestvo* was presented as a way of reconciling these parties, and more generally as a way of reconciling conservatism and progressivism.²⁰ It was first and foremost about reintegrating the Westernized mind (the educated classes) and the Slavic heart (peasantry) of Russia itself.²¹ As Dostoevsky says, it aimed to facilitate "the reconciliation of civilization with the basic ideas of our common people."²² Dostoevsky pointed towards major changes taking place "with the consent of the entire nation," including the liberation of the serfs in 1861, which he hoped would culminate in "total union between the educated section of our population with its national element and the participation of the whole of our great Russian people in the events of our current life."²³

According to Wayne Dowler, what Dostoevsky meant by the reconciliation of the educated classes and the peasantry, "in the most practical terms," was that the former should empower the latter to express their inchoate spiritual wisdom and lend it to

²⁰ Dowler, 1982: 12. Frank, 1986: 34-47. The conciliatory attitude was favoured by Dostoevsky in particular, often to the chagrin of his associates (Frank, 1986: 51-55).

²¹ Dowler, 1982: 75.

²² Dostoevsky, 1964: 232.

²³ Dostoevsky, 1964: 229.

the political life of the nation. Thus the education of the common people was the first step, since it would enable them to make themselves understood by the educated classes.²⁴ The peasants possessed the principle of genuine community and association, but they lacked the means of building a “viable economic or social system on it;” these means could be supplied by the educated classes, who would “infuse” the native forms of association “with knowledge and the highest goals.”²⁵ *Pochvennichestvo* was criticized for being too vague; but its proponents stressed that they did not intend to provide a concrete program for action because they denied the viability of any such program, and argued that progress in society should come about as naturally and spontaneously as possible from the “heart” of the nation, and not merely from its “head.” That being said, for Dowler their approach to social and political issues “rested far less on a detailed and accurate evaluation of the forces at work in the past and present than it did on a utopian vision of the future.”²⁶

Overall, *pochvennichestvo* effectively superseded Slavophilism insofar as the latter was unable to accommodate the economic and social modernization taking place in Russia, and which would continue to take place even without the approval of the more conservative intelligentsia;²⁷ the *pochvenniki* professed a more “evolutionary conservatism” that was ready to embrace both what they considered to be valuable in the past and what the future might have to offer.²⁸ Nevertheless, it was in some respects no less reactionary than Slavophilism, and incorporated such basically conservative Slavophile themes as the need to restore and defend the spiritual unity of the nation from the divisive and corrupting influence of the West.²⁹ Dostoevsky was clear that he regarded the assimilation of Western civilization as a necessary step in the development of the Russian nation, but *only* because it could facilitate the triumph of those

²⁴ Dostoevsky, 1964: 159.

²⁵ Dowler, 1982: 110f.

²⁶ Dowler, 1982: 92.

²⁷ Leatherbarrow, 2010: 112f.

²⁸ Dowler, 1982: 93.

²⁹ For Dostoevsky’s relations with Slavophilism, both in general and in his *pochvennichestvo* phase more specifically, see Hudspith, 2004.

traditional spiritual forces that remained embryonic in the Russian peasantry: “all of us,” he wrote, “are conscious of the fact that civilization has brought us back to our native soil.”³⁰ As such, although Dostoevsky was not conservative in the sense of valuing what is traditional just because it is traditional, he was conservative insofar as he thought that social and political change should respect the “spirit of the nation” and should not be imposed artificially according to some pre-established theory of what would be best for it.³¹ In practice this meant that he supported the tsardom and sought to protect Russia’s native religious heritage; ultimately, therefore, *pochvennichestvo* did not succeed in its hope of reconciling the conservative and progressive strands of the intelligentsia. In particular, it could not accommodate itself to the demands of the more radical Westernizers, or, following them, of the even more uncompromising Nihilists, who believed that the cultural and technological fruits of civilization were by no means adequate to the needs of the nation, which also required revolutionary upheavals in its politics, economics and religion. These thinkers espoused socialism and atheism, which the *pochvenniki* could not accept. Thus, despite its initially conciliatory attitude, the journalism of *pochvennichestvo* increasingly engaged in polemics against the Nihilists.³² It is to this phase of Dostoevsky’s career that *Notes from Underground* belongs.

Prior to *Notes from Underground*, the polemical and utopian aspects of *pochvennichestvo* were expressed by Dostoevsky in the less fictional *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions*, a short “travel diary” comprising reflections on society and politics prompted by Dostoevsky’s first visit to Western Europe. In large part a critique of prevailing Western culture and politics, it is also an attack on the Nihilists.³³ Dostoevsky uses his observations on the moral and spiritual degradation of the West to indict the broadly nihilistic ideology that, he thinks, gave rise to it, and would give rise to similar degradation in Russia if it became prevalent there as well. He would use a very similar

³⁰ Dostoevsky, 1964: 157.

³¹ Dowler, 1982: 110.

³² Dowler, 1982: 12; Frank, 1986: 351; Hudspeth, 2010: 285.

³³ Offord, 2009: 126.

polemical strategy—though in a very different form—in *Notes from Underground*. Thus Frank writes that *Winter Notes* can be seen as a prelude or preliminary draft of *Notes from Underground*.³⁴ *Winter Notes* is also extremely important for its clear presentation of Dostoevsky's own Christian utopian ideal, the ultimate goal of his *pochvennichestvo* ideology. The result is a kind of social contract theory in which he elaborates on the meaning of genuine brotherhood and social unity, in contrast to the artificial *fraternité* of Western socialism:

What would brotherhood consist of if it were put into rational, conscious language? Of this: each separate individual, without any compulsion, without any benefit to himself, would say to society, "We are strong only when we are together; take everything from me, if you require that of me; do not think of me as you make your laws; do not be at all concerned about me; I offer you all my rights; dispose of me as you please. This is my highest happiness: to sacrifice everything to you and to do you no harm in doing so. I shall annihilate myself, I shall melt away with complete indifference, if only your brotherhood will flourish and endure." The brotherhood, on the other hand, must say, "You offer us too much. We have no right not to accept what you offer us, for you yourself say that in this lies all your happiness; but what is to be done, when in our hearts we are constantly concerned about your happiness? Take everything that is ours too. Every minute and with all our strength we shall try to increase your personal freedom and self-revelation as much as possible. Do not fear any enemies now, either among people or in nature. We are all behind you; we all guarantee your safety; we are forever doing our utmost for you because we are brothers; we are all your brothers; there are many of us, and we are strong: so be at peace and of good cheer, fear nothing, and rely on us."³⁵

Dostoevsky's "contractarianism" can be distinguished from traditional versions, such as those of Hobbes and Locke, as well as from Chernyshevsky's, in several respects.³⁶ In the first place, it is not supposed to be "rational, conscious" or intellectually justified; it is supposed to be an entirely spontaneous manifestation of the moral attitudes

³⁴ Frank, 1986: 233.

³⁵ Dostoevsky, 1964: 50.

³⁶ See Hobbes, 1996; Locke, 1960; Boucher and Kelly, 1994.

of its members. Secondly, it is uniquely uncompromising—it demands of each individual the sacrifice of *all* individual rights, and not merely the right to decide and enforce the laws, to declare war, etc. Thirdly, whereas traditional social contracts are supposed to be entered into by individuals seeking to protect *themselves* and their own property against injustice, Dostoevsky's contract is entered into by individuals seeking to dedicate themselves altruistically to *one another*; although it is clear that he thinks each individual will benefit greatly from this arrangement, any such benefit is plainly not what can or should motivate a person to enter into it. Indeed, he says that the prospects of genuine brotherhood are entirely ruined by even the slightest desire for personal advantage—the social bond must be based upon pure altruism.³⁷ The material benefits of this association then follow as a natural but unintentional consequence—“Love one another, and all these things will be added unto you.”³⁸ That Dostoevsky's vision of the perfect society is uncompromising in its demands for self-abnegation and altruism shall always be borne in mind in what follows, since it has significant implications for how *Notes from Underground* should be understood.

2. Society and Psychology

In common with other nineteenth-century political thinkers, Dostoevsky believed that politics and psychology were intimately connected, and that the proper functioning of society depended on and contributed to the psychological wellbeing of its members. The intersection of psychology and social philosophy is plainly central to *Notes from Underground*, as we shall see in what follows, and it is in this work that Dostoevsky subjects the psychological basis of society and politics to his closest scrutiny. The main conclusion he draws from his insights is clear enough: utopian socialism will fail because it rests upon a mistaken view of human nature and its needs. But

³⁷ Dostoevsky, 1964: 49.

³⁸ Dostoevsky, 1964: 50.

what exactly he thinks is mistaken about this view, and how exactly Dostoevsky intends to prove that it is mistaken, is far from clear.

The complexities of the Underground Man's own character, or the "underground psychology," are the main focus of the *Notes*. The psychology of the Underground Man has received a great deal of critical attention, as have Dostoevsky's social and political ideas. What I believe has not received its due is the vital link between the two. Bruce Ward's *Dostoyevsky's Critique of the West*, for example, recognizes the social and political importance of "the underground" but devotes only two pages to describing it, and overlooks the psychological difficulties it raises.³⁹ For Ward, it is simply a symptom of modern society's lack of a guiding "idea" which could provide stability and spiritual fortitude to its members. It seems to me that this is entirely correct, as far as it goes, but that there is a great deal more to the phenomenon illustrated by the Underground Man than Ward, whose concerns are more specifically social and political, sees fit to explore. Joseph Frank, by contrast, has given a more thorough analysis of *Notes from Underground* which attempts to unify its psychological and social-philosophical perspectives using the ideas of free will and determinism.⁴⁰ Whilst I wholly agree with the aspirations of this approach, of which Frank's analysis is now only one canonical example, I shall argue that it is subject to an insoluble contradiction. This concerns the relationship between Dostoevsky's critique of utopian socialism and his own Christian utopian aspirations, both of which are absolutely central to his social philosophy. The former is understood to revolve around the idea that materialistic socialism is incompatible with the basic human need for freedom. As I shall argue in Chapter 2, however, if this need for freedom is strong enough to make the socialist utopia impossible, then it must be strong enough to make Dostoevsky's own utopia impossible as well: both are premised on the sacrifice of individual liberty for the sake of public good. In general, I do not believe that previous scholarship has taken this contradiction seriously enough, and has simply

³⁹ Ward, 1986: 39f.

⁴⁰ Frank, 1986: 312-331.

bypassed it through describing the negative component of Dostoevsky's social philosophy, his attack on utopian socialism, in complete abstraction from the positive, his Christian utopianism.

I contend that this contradiction disappears once the psychology of the Underground Man is understood in a different way. Examining *Notes from Underground* more closely, we find that the need for freedom is not, ultimately, what Dostoevsky uses to attack utopian socialism; and that in fact he deploys a more complex psychological argument based on the ideas of *idealism*, *nihilism*, *disillusionment* and *caprice*.⁴¹ This argument is convoluted and difficult, but can be understood much more easily when it is put into the right theoretical and literary context: Dostoevsky is merely building on a train of thought belonging to the *Sturm und Drang* movement of eighteenth-century Germany. It is through a comparative analysis of this tradition that, ultimately, I hope to elucidate the psychology of the underground man and demonstrate the way in which Dostoevsky uses it to construct an argument against Chernyshevsky's utopian socialism, and build his social-philosophical ideas, including his critique of utopian socialism and his own utopian *pochvennichestvo*, into a coherent and rationally compelling system of thought.

* * *

This dissertation is divided into two parts.⁴² In Part 1, I focus on the text of *Notes from Underground* itself, and clarify the themes and ideas which any interpretation of Dostoevsky's polemical intentions is required to understand. In Part 2, I build on these foundations to develop my interpretation of the *Notes*, drawing on comparisons with

⁴¹ In general, I shall use "Nihilism" to refer to the Russian school of thought including Chernyshevsky, Pisarev etc., and "nihilism" to refer to the more general philosophical position which they adopted, namely, extreme rationalism and reductive naturalism. (Proponents of "nihilism" who are not "Nihilists" include, for example, the *philosophes* La Mettrie and d'Holbach, who we shall encounter in Chapter 6.)

⁴² To avoid confusion, I shall use Arabic numerals to refer to the parts and chapters of this dissertation (e.g. Chapter 3 of Part 2), and Roman numerals to refer to the divisions of *Notes from Underground* (e.g. Chapter III of Part II).

Schiller and Goethe, and a historical survey of relevant ideas that prevailed in the time separating Dostoevsky from the *Sturm und Drang*, in order to clarify and motivate my understanding of Dostoevsky's position.

Before beginning, I shall briefly address some methodological issues. There are many different approaches to the study of Dostoevsky's work, and it may be worth indicating where my own aims fall in relation to existing scholarship. It is well known that Dostoevsky wrote "novels of ideas," that is, books in which sophisticated patterns of thought are conveyed in the form of fiction, by a variety of literary means. In his essay "Mr —bov and the Question of Art," Dostoevsky himself wrote:

[T]he high artistic quality of, let us say, a novelist is his ability to express the idea of his novel in the characters and images of his novel so that after reading it the reader understands the writer's idea as well as the novelist has understood it himself when creating his work.⁴³

The goal of this dissertation is to explicate one of the ideas, or systems of ideas, expressed in *Notes from Underground*, namely, Dostoevsky's argument against Nihilist utopian socialism. The assumption behind such an approach is, as Bruce Ward says, that the ideas expressed by Dostoevsky in his novels "can be rendered more systematic and explicit, and hence more accessible to those who are interested."⁴⁴ In his book *Dostoevsky the Thinker*, James Scanlan aims "to examine the conceptual structure of his philosophical beliefs and try to identify whatever grounding he believed he had for them. Overall, the effort will be to present a portrait of Dostoevsky's philosophical thought that he himself [...] might recognize as tolerably faithful to both its letter and its spirit."⁴⁵ I have adopted much the same strategy.

Of course, because Dostoevsky never wrote a systematic philosophical work, this kind of "philosophical ghostwriting" (as Scanlan calls it) is not unproblematic. In addition to the usual difficulties involved in unravelling a philosopher's opinions,

⁴³ Dostoevsky, 1964: 101.

⁴⁴ Ward, 1986: 6.

⁴⁵ Scanlan, 2002: 10.

readers of Dostoevsky must also attempt to navigate his use of irony, unreliable narration, the vested interests and ulterior motives of various characters, dialogue, deliberate falsehoods, allusions, symbols, and so on. Although similar complexities can sometimes be encountered in traditional philosophical texts, they are certainly more pronounced in works of fiction, and, as many scholars believe, in Dostoevsky's novels in particular. This last conviction is due largely to the influence of Mikhail Bakhtin, who argued that Dostoevsky created a new type of novel that was fundamentally "polyphonic" and resistant to the imposition of a "monological" perspective.⁴⁶ As Bakhtin himself put it: "A plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices is in fact the chief characteristic of Dostoevsky's novels."⁴⁷

This has lent support to a scepticism about the very possibility of arriving at any conclusive *interpretation* of Dostoevsky's novels, and this scepticism has been exacerbated by the fact that so many conflicting views on Dostoevsky's works have been proposed over the decades.⁴⁸ "It seems to me," writes Malcolm Jones, "that the fact that Dostoevsky attracts so many different readings is itself not accidental and it needs to be explained other than by the need of the critic to say something new, or by pious references to his genius."⁴⁹ From this, Jones draws support for his view that Dostoevsky wrote "self-deconstructing" novels, confounding attempts to disentangle their various meanings.⁵⁰ As he writes elsewhere:

[T]o find order where there appears to be chaos, clarity where there appears to be confusion, coherence where there appears to be conflict, precision where there appears to be indeterminacy; to reconcile all

⁴⁶ On the influence of this kind of Bakhtinian interpretation in the twentieth century, see Kelly, 1988: 239-242.

⁴⁷ Bakhtin, 1984: 6.

⁴⁸ Presumably, this way of thinking also coheres with the more general post-modern scepticism about fixed meanings, final interpretations and speculation about authorial intentions.

⁴⁹ Jones, 1990: xv.

⁵⁰ Jones, 1990: xiv.

apparent contradictions, and to smooth over all apparent inconsistencies. [...] no. Dostoevsky's novels are too broad for such treatment.⁵¹

If this were true, of course, the kind of interpretation offered in this dissertation would be misguided. A related concern stems from the notion that Dostoevsky's characters are psychologically so complex as to preclude the possibility of integration into an overarching theoretical structure. "It is as if the author himself had only limited control over them," Victor Terras writes; "Even if born of an idea, even if owing his existence to a purely literary stimulus, the Dostoevskian hero is, first of all, a person in his own right, an autonomous microcosm, not a puppet at the mercy of an arbitrary creator."⁵² Gary Saul Morson has also claimed that Dostoevsky regards human psychology as "irreducibly complex."⁵³ In this respect, Dostoevsky is often contrasted with Chernyshevsky, whose heroes he regarded as psychologically unmotivated, designed only to fulfil the needs of his theories.⁵⁴ For Donald Fanger, "while Chernyshevsky was reducing psychology to a scheme, Dostoevsky was proclaiming it an irreducible chaos."⁵⁵

The perceived impossibility of understanding Dostoevsky's characters psychologically has even been seen as an important element of his moral and spiritual outlook. For Terras, anyone "whose life can be accounted for in purely psychological terms is lacking free will and is without divine Grace."⁵⁶ He claims that Dostoevsky deliberately violated his own psychological insights in the creation of his "good" characters, such as Zosima and Alyosha in *The Brothers Karamazov*, so as to preclude the possibility of their seeming subject to any kind of psychological necessity.⁵⁷ Since, following Joseph Frank, I regard the character of the Underground Man as an essential

⁵¹ Jones, 2005: x.

⁵² Terras, 1969: 159.

⁵³ Morson, 2010: 163.

⁵⁴ Belknap, 2009: 134.

⁵⁵ Fanger, 1965: 180.

⁵⁶ Terras, 1998: 50. Cf. Fanger, 1965: 180f.

⁵⁷ Terras, 1998: 50.

component of Dostoevsky's polemic against utopian socialism, this too would be a fatal objection to my reading of the *Notes*.⁵⁸

It is not my intention to argue for or against any particular hermeneutical methodology here, but only to acknowledge that this is a point of contention, and to clearly state my own assumptions. That Dostoevsky's novels are "self-deconstructing" is only one possible explanation for the proliferation of rival interpretations; another is that he wrote books that are incredibly difficult to understand. Likewise, it is possible to recognize that Dostoevsky's characters are often difficult to comprehend psychologically, without drawing the conclusion that their thoughts and activities are an "irreducible chaos" incapable of conforming to their author's designs.⁵⁹ As to the question of "polyphony," I agree with Scanlan's view that Dostoevsky's philosophy is "dialogical in style, monological in substance."⁶⁰ Overall, I adopt what Jones refers to as the "refreshingly common-sense view" of Joseph Frank, and assume that Dostoevsky's novels, whatever else they may be, do serve as vehicles for his various theoretical commitments—including his arguments against utopian socialism—and that it may yet be possible, in principle, to uncover and explicate these commitments.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Against Bakhtin, Frank writes that "the nucleus of Dostoevsky's novels may be compared to that of an eighteenth-century *conte philosophique*, whose characters were also largely embodiments of ideas; but instead of remaining bloodless abstractions like [Voltaire's] *Candide* or *Zadig*, they will be fleshed out with all the verisimilitude and psychological density of the nineteenth-century novel of social realism" (Frank, 1986: 346).

⁵⁹ Wasiolek, 1964: xii.

⁶⁰ Scanlan, 2002: 4.

⁶¹ Jones, 1990: xv.

Chapter 2: Dostoevsky and Freedom

1. The Libertarian Interpretation

The most well-developed interpretations of Dostoevsky's polemic against utopian socialism are those of Robert Louis Jackson, Joseph Frank and James Scanlan.¹ These scholars all think that Dostoevsky's chief complaint against utopian socialism is that it is a threat to *freedom*. I thus call the kind of interpretations they advocate *libertarian*. Many other scholars have endorsed similar views in passing, without delving deeply into the matter.² In this chapter, I shall first outline the libertarian interpretation of *Notes from Underground*. I shall then argue that it is essential to specify what *kinds* of freedom Dostoevsky and his narrator, the Underground Man, are interested in. I distinguish three different varieties of freedom, which I further clarify with reference to Dostoevsky's works and the views of several philosophers. On the basis of these distinctions, I show that the theme of freedom is a highly questionable guide to understanding Dostoevsky polemic, and lay the conceptual foundations for developing a new interpretation.

Notes from Underground is perhaps the most important source for the libertarian interpretation in general, since it is Dostoevsky's most sustained—albeit, perhaps, most obscure—engagement with the utopian socialism of the Nihilists, and one of its

¹ Their interpretations are found primarily in Frank, 1986: 310-47; Scanlan, 2003; Jackson, 1995.

² E.g. Belliotti, 2016: 204; Barstow, 1978: 29; Cassedy, 2005: 48; Hudspith, 2004: 55; Katz, 2002: 72; Leatherbarrow, 2005: 48; Lord, 1970: 40-43; Peace, 1971: 7-12; Young, 2015: 180. There have been alternative proposals, none of which I shall address in detail here, but most of which turn upon a claim of the following sort: Dostoevsky thinks utopian socialism will fail because human beings are too irrational, too chaotic, too mad, too irascible, too bored, or too capricious, to settle for any kind of utopian stability (e.g. Alexander-Davey, 2013: 124f.; Carter, 1991: 107-111; Ealy, 2013: 196; Fanger, 1965: 180f.; Wasiolek, 1964: 58). The problem faced by all of these interpretations is that they attribute to Dostoevsky an extreme pessimism about human nature which, apart from finding little consistent support in his novels, flatly contradicts his commitment to *pochvennichestvo* and to the regeneration of society on Christian foundations.

narrator's most pressing concerns is clearly the importance of freedom, which he calls the "most advantageous advantage" of humankind. Whilst there is much disagreement about the relationship between Dostoevsky's own opinions and the content of the *Notes*, most scholars agree that Dostoevsky shares, in some way and to some extent, the Underground Man's concern for the preservation of freedom in the face of certain illiberal ideologies and social structures. In Frank's formulation, Dostoevsky's main argument against utopian socialism is as follows:

The one "most advantageous advantage" for man is the preservation of his free will, which may or may not be exercised in harmony with reason but which, in any case, always wishes to preserve the right to *choose*; and this primary "advantage" cannot be included in the systems of the lovers of humanity [i.e. the utopian socialists] because it makes forever impossible their dream of transforming human nature to desire *only* the rational.³

In other words, utopian socialism will fail because it cannot satisfy the all-important and universal need for freedom. Similarly, according to Scanlan, Dostoevsky maintains that "the [socialist] utopia cannot be achieved without an unacceptable constriction of individual liberty."⁴ And again: "[Dostoevsky's] most repeated and most impassioned argument against [socialism] is that a socialist system would destroy human freedom."⁵ In order to spell out this argument, which I call "the Libertarian Argument," I shall consider Frank's, Jackson's and Scanlan's interpretations of the *Notes*, from which they derive it.

According to Frank, Dostoevsky presents the diseased psychology of the Underground Man itself as an argument against utopian socialism. He claims that the Underground Man has thoroughly assimilated all the ideals of the socialists, and that these ideals are what has made him into the person he is; in other words, his bad character illustrates what would happen if anyone genuinely believed and took to

³ Frank, 1986: 324.

⁴ Scanlan, 2003: 162.

⁵ Scanlan, 2003: 185.

heart the utopian socialist ideology. More precisely, he has accepted their doctrines on an intellectual level, but, being a flesh-and-blood human, he cannot reconcile them with his moral and emotional needs. As John Carroll puts it, he is “a man trying to live with the conviction that truth and value have become incompatible.”⁶ This conflict, Frank thinks, is what results in his “underground psychology” as a whole.

I will consider the details of Frank’s understanding of the Underground Man’s psychology, and its relation to utopian socialist ideology, in due course. For now, in order to clarify his understanding of Dostoevsky’s polemic, it is only important to note that he thinks the most dangerous aspect of utopian socialism, from a psychological point of view, is *determinism*. This, according to Frank, is the fundamental cause of the Underground Man’s problems: he adopts Chernyshevsky’s idea (expressed in the *Anthropological Principle in Philosophy* and *What is to be Done?*) that free will is an illusion because all human behaviour is determined by the laws of nature,⁷ and he tries to live in accordance with what this entails. Believing that there can be no moral responsibility, for instance, he tries to suppress his moral and emotional responses to the insults he receives; what is the use of feeling insulted or demanding justice, when the offending party is only acting in accordance with the laws of nature, and so can’t be guilty of anything? In spite of this reasoning, however, he finds that he simply cannot help feeling insulted. Thus his intellectual acceptance of determinism is undermined by his moral-emotional inability to come to terms with its consequences. This internal conflict drives him to the point of insanity, makes him masochistic and capricious, and, in general, creates the character of the “Underground Man.”⁸ Because of this affliction, he is in no fit state to contribute productively to a harmonious society, as the socialists demand that their citizens should, and so he goes to show that utopian

⁶ Carroll, 1974: 112. Cf. Ealy, 2013: 184-186.

⁷ Chernyshevsky, 1953: 94f.; 1989: 118.

⁸ On this reading, Dostoevsky’s novel can be seen as a kind of riposte to Diderot’s *Jacques the Fatalist*—also intended to illustrate the practical consequences of believing in determinism, which, for Diderot, are quite benign and amount only to mild eccentricity and a kind of Stoic resignation (Diderot, 1999: 70, 150).

socialism—because of its deterministic denial of free will—is self-defeating: the real consequences of the theory are diametrically opposed to its purpose.

Jackson shares with Frank this theory of the Underground Man's character as a product of his acceptance of nihilist doctrines. Jackson's understanding of the *Notes from Underground* is based on his reading of the *Notes from the House of the Dead*, Dostoevsky's fictionalized account of his life in a Siberian prison camp. The themes of freedom and constraint are central to the latter, as may be expected from a book about prison, and Jackson draws upon them in explaining the psychology of the Underground Man. He focuses in particular on the experiences of certain convicts who, Dostoevsky recalls, would indulge themselves in senseless bouts of drinking and revelry, despite knowing that they would afterwards be caught and punished severely.⁹ As Jackson notes, the convicts behave this way in order to enjoy a sense of freedom that is otherwise denied to them:

starting out with a defense of personality, with the natural demands for self-expression, the individual spins out of control and plunges into the "abyss of the most unbridled and limitless freedom," revelling in the fact that "nothing was sacred for him any more."¹⁰

These unbridled "convulsions" are a reaction to the frustration of a legitimate need for freedom, which expresses itself destructively only because it cannot do so naturally and positively.¹¹ Jackson thus agrees with Frank in his understanding of this dangerous irascibility as a reaction to the constriction of freedom.

Jackson also refers to the idea of determinism, which is for him a means of transitioning from the *House of the Dead* to *Notes from Underground*: he takes it that "the iron clad

⁹ Dostoevsky, 2003(a): 110.

¹⁰ Jackson, 1995: 7.

¹¹ Jackson, 1995: 5. See also Jackson's introduction to *Notes from Underground* and *The Double*: "In the most basic sense the underground behaviour and outlook of the new social type, as it pertains to Dostoyevsky's early works in particular, is the consequence of a radical denial of man's organic need for self-expression, of his natural drive to be himself and to occupy his own space and place in the world. The suppression of the basic drives of human nature, however, signifies not their death, but their disfiguration" (Dostoevsky, 2009(a): xi).

determinism, that has overtaken both reason and the individual in prison”¹² is much the same as that which the Underground Man grapples with in the form of Chernyshevsky’s philosophy. Of course, the convicts are faced with a much more concrete embodiment of “determinism,” namely, the constraints of their prison, while the Underground Man is oppressed merely by the thought of determinism; nevertheless, Jackson thinks both parties are subject to the same psychological affliction. Though the Underground Man is not an actual prisoner, his nihilistic view of the universe means that he suffers from the same anxiety of constraint, and the same capricious reaction against this constraint. We may also add that the socialist utopia, according to libertarian readers, *would* if implemented amount to a real attack on freedom, because it would result in something like the totalitarian regimes stemming from socialism in the twentieth century; thus the Underground Man is also oppressed in advance by the socialist utopia itself. “We have here, in a nutshell,” Jackson writes, “the whole problematic of *Notes from the Underground*. The Underground Man not only embodies ‘convulsions’ in his psychology, but gives conscious articulation of these convulsions in his irrational will philosophy.”¹³ Thus Jackson agrees with Frank that the Underground Man illustrates the effects of taking to heart the doctrine of determinism.¹⁴ Jackson is less clear than Frank that this constitutes an argument against Chernyshevsky’s utopian socialism, but this claim is at least implicit; since Chernyshevsky is a proponent of determinism, the assertion that determinism leads to “convulsions” is an attack on his position.

In general, as stated, Frank does not think Dostoevsky uses the Underground Man as a mouthpiece for his own ideas; on the contrary, far from being anything with which Dostoevsky would agree, the splenetic ramblings of the Underground Man serve to illustrate the effect the radical ideology has had on his mind. Jackson would seem to concur with this interpretation. However, Frank goes on to explain that the Underground Man does produce direct arguments against the utopian socialist ideal (to be

¹² Jackson, 1995: 6.

¹³ Jackson, 1995: 6.

¹⁴ Jackson, 1958: 36.

found especially in Chapters VII-X of Part I of the *Notes*), and he attributes these arguments, which are illustrated by the Underground Man's own experiences of trying unsuccessfully to put the radical ideology into practice, to Dostoevsky himself. The Underground Man's central contention here is that utopian socialism, if propagated or ever put into practice, would necessarily fail because it would mean an unacceptable constriction of freedom, both in its theoretical espousal of determinism and in its utopian vision of "deterministic" social and economic reorganization.

The Underground Man has already tried to live in accordance with the truth of determinism and failed: he could not suppress his moral-emotional responses even though he believed them to be irrational. He is thus, we might think, well placed to understand the importance of freedom in human life. The Underground Man grants (for the sake of argument, at least) that the socialist utopia is possible, but he denies that it would be able to endure for long because of its disregard for the liberties of the individual: in such a society, life would be regimented according to scientific theories designed to maximize the fulfilment of material and emotional needs. The "most advantageous advantage" of all, he says, is freedom, and people will disdain all other advantages, as well as defy reason itself, if they must do so in order to preserve a sense of freedom. Confronted with the stifling predictability of a scientific utopia in which freedom of choice is "obsolescent" (as Jackson puts it),¹⁵ people will go the way of the Underground Man himself and disrupt the general harmony so as to satisfy their craving for free choice. The need for freedom then manifests as a destructive, chaotic force with no internal restraints. Whether or not this force is a good thing in itself (according to Frank, the Underground Man thinks it isn't), it springs from a good and worthy source, and "is envisaged *only* as a last-ditch defense against the hypothetical accomplishment of the Crystal Palace ideal."¹⁶

It seems that according to Frank there are two facets to Dostoevsky's argument. The first, of which the personality of the Underground Man is supposed to be an

¹⁵ Jackson, 1981: 161.

¹⁶ Frank, 1986: 326.

illustration, is the idea that *propagating utopian socialist ideas* will have negative psychological consequences which undermine the aims of those ideas. The second, which is formulated explicitly by the Underground Man on behalf of Dostoevsky, is that a *society founded on the utopian socialist model* would have the same negative psychological consequences and would provoke rebellion. The common element of both strands is the idea that a chaotic psychological backlash, exemplified by the Underground Man himself, is the end result of believing, under the influence of some kind of “determinism,” that one has no free will. People who feel that they have no freedom—whether because they accept determinism as an idea or because their society is arranged “deterministically,” that is, scientifically regimented—will behave capriciously and therefore become enemies of social harmony. “In both cases,” Frank writes, “the cause of this chaos is the same: the revolt of the personality against a world in which free will (and hence moral categories of any kind) has no further reason for being.”¹⁷

We may generalize Frank’s understanding of Dostoevsky’s argument against utopian socialism, which for the sake of convenience I shall call the “Libertarian Argument” in what follows, like so:

1. Humans have an ineradicable need for freedom, which is in general stronger than all other needs. So people who feel their freedom to be threatened will do anything to preserve it. They will go mad and attempt capriciously to throw off all limitations.
2. Utopian socialism threatens freedom.
3. Therefore, people will rebel against utopian socialism.

Again, as Frank sees it, this argument is both illustrated by Dostoevsky in the character of the Underground Man (Jackson also seems to endorse an interpretation of this

¹⁷ Frank, 1986: 326.

kind), and advanced directly by the Underground Man, when, speaking on Dostoevsky's behalf, he criticizes utopian socialism directly.

Scanlan approaches the work from a completely different angle, but comes to much the same conclusions about Dostoevsky's polemic in *Notes from Underground*. More precisely, he agrees with Frank's *second* means of attributing the Libertarian Argument to Dostoevsky, namely, the idea that the Underground Man expresses this argument directly on Dostoevsky's behalf. Scanlan rejects Frank's contention—the starting point for his overall interpretation—that the Underground Man accepts the Nihilist doctrines on an intellectual level and has been corrupted by them. He argues instead that Dostoevsky typically uses the Underground Man as a mouthpiece for his own ideas, and that the Underground Man has no consistent intellectual sympathy for Chernyshevsky's views.¹⁸ He points in particular to Chapter VII of Part I, noting that there is nothing to suggest any agreement with the doctrines the Underground Man is arguing against. In fact, Frank does recognise this, as we have seen. Unlike Frank, though, Scanlan thinks the primary polemical function of the *Notes* is not psychological *reductio ad absurdum*, but direct philosophical refutation of Chernyshevsky's position with cogent logical arguments, which are consistently expressed by the Underground Man on Dostoevsky's behalf.¹⁹ Scanlan, unlike Frank and Jackson, does not think that the Underground Man's psychology is used by Dostoevsky to illustrate the effects of believing in determinism because he does not think the Underground Man believes in determinism.

Scanlan summarises his understanding of the Underground Man's Libertarian Argument as follows:

Human beings, on this view, are fundamentally wilful creatures who are moved to defy reason, common sense, and the expectations of others in order to express their own wills. [...] Obviously this insistence on wilful behaviour is a fatal obstacle to the creation of a utopian social

¹⁸ Scanlan, 2003: 59.

¹⁹ Scanlan, 2003: 60.

order such as the Rational Egoists had in mind. Even if provided with all other benefits but free choice, in the most rationally ordered of societies, individuals will insist on asserting their independence, at the cost of destroying the system.²⁰

Although Scanlan sometimes (as here) suggests that capricious wilfulness is, for both Dostoevsky and the Underground Man, a fundamental and *ineliminable* feature of human psychology,²¹ it is clear that he regards the *desire for* and the *exercise of* such caprice to be circumstantial. He states that the Underground Man's capriciousness "illustrates the evils of a freedom unstructured by higher values; the Underground Man's egoism is the perversion of a distinctive and precious human capacity by exempting it from all spiritual authority."²² This implies that the "fundamentally wilful" nature of human beings can manifest itself in ways that are not at all problematic, namely, when tempered and channelled by the "higher values" of morality and religion. Thus Scanlan seems to agree with Frank and Jackson that the destructive wilfulness described by the Underground Man is to be understood as a psychological reaction to Chernyshevsky's nihilist doctrines, which eliminate these values.²³ Again, utopian socialism fails because it entails a constriction of freedom which human beings cannot accept, and thus generates a backlash against social order and stability that undermines its own aims. So, both Frank and Scanlan think that the Underground Man voices this argument, and is speaking for Dostoevsky when he does so.

In sum, we have seen that there are two main ways in which the libertarian interpretation attempts to derive the Libertarian Argument from *Notes from Underground*: firstly, Frank and Jackson view the character of the Underground Man as an illustration of the effects of believing in Chernyshevsky's doctrines, and in particular the idea of determinism; secondly, Frank and Scanlan read the Underground Man's attack on utopian socialism as a direct expression of the Libertarian Argument. In the first case,

²⁰ Scanlan, 2003: 71.

²¹ See also Scanlan, 2003: 74.

²² Scanlan, 2003: 75.

²³ Though, once again, Scanlan does not agree with Frank that the Underground Man actually believes these doctrines on any level.

it is thought that Dostoevsky puts forward the argument obliquely, through illustrating the truth of the conclusion and allowing his readers to deduce the premises; in the second case, it is thought that Dostoevsky includes the argument straightforwardly in the discourse of his narrator. It is important to distinguish these two strands of the libertarian reading, since they can be evaluated separately. I shall assess the first in Chapter 3, the second in Chapter 4. First, however, some more clarifications are required before the true import of both Dostoevsky's text and the libertarian reading of it can be ascertained.

2. Disambiguation of "Freedom"

As we have seen, Jackson, Frank and Scanlan all read the Underground Man's diatribe against utopian socialism as an argument based on the incompatibility of utopian socialism and some kind of craving for freedom. On some level, this must certainly be true: the Underground Man clearly thinks that freedom is the "most advantageous advantage" which the utopian socialists have failed to take into consideration, and which will be the spanner in the works of their system. But there is a great deal of confusion surrounding the notion of freedom here. In what follows I shall try to clarify the meaning and significance of words like "freedom" in *Notes from Underground* and for Dostoevsky generally. This will enable us to understand the polemic of the *Notes* and determine whether it amounts, as Jackson, Frank and Scanlan think, to a defence of individual freedom against socialist paternalism.

We may begin to unravel these complexities by determining the extent to which Dostoevsky and the Underground Man disagree about the significance of freedom. According to Scanlan, Dostoevsky accepts the Underground Man's description of the monumental importance of freedom in human psychology, but disagrees with his assessment of the moral worth of some of its manifestations. As Scanlan writes, in his

discussion of the relation between Dostoevsky's ideas and those of the Underground Man:

Where Dostoevsky parts company with the Underground Man, of course, is in the *appraisal* of this egoistic insistence on boundless freedom. For all the importance of free choice in Dostoevsky's worldview, when the Underground Man proceeds to the normative dimension of Rational Egoism and characterizes freedom itself as man's "most advantageous advantage," we cannot assume that he is still echoing Dostoevsky's own convictions.²⁴

Scanlan's point, I take it, is that Dostoevsky accepts the Underground Man's *description* of human psychology, but not his *evaluation* of that psychology. In other words, Dostoevsky does believe that if their freedom is threatened, as in the socialist utopia, people will respond capriciously as the Underground Man suggests; but, unlike the Underground Man, he does not believe that that this capricious reaction is itself commendable.

This is how, according to Scanlan's interpretation, Dostoevsky can retain custody of the Underground Man's polemics—the Libertarian Argument, which is based only on the descriptive observation that humans require freedom at all costs and become capricious when it is threatened—without pardoning the Underground Man's definition of capricious freedom as his or anyone else's "most advantageous advantage." This is an important point, because the kind of freedom the Underground Man presents as the "most advantageous advantage" is plainly not the kind that would appeal to Dostoevsky.

For Dostoevsky, as Scanlan points out, the only kind of "freedom" which really matters "lies not in free choice as such but in the free acceptance of Christ as His moral message."²⁵ Indeed, as he goes on to explain, Dostoevsky didn't care *at all* about "the unruly freedom" of the Underground Man, believing instead that true freedom is

²⁴ Scanlan, 2003: 75, my italics.

²⁵ Scanlan, 2003: 75.

actually a voluntary curtailment of free choice for the sake of moral self-mastery.

Scanlan quotes from the following passage in the *Writer's Diary*:²⁶

The way the world conceives freedom today is as license [разнузданность], whereas real freedom lies only in overcoming the self and the will so as ultimately to achieve a moral condition in which one at each moment is the real master of himself. But giving licence to your desires only leads to your enslavement. That is why almost the whole of today's world supposes that freedom lies in financial security and in laws guaranteeing that financial security: "I have money and so I can do whatever I like [...]."²⁷

One could also add Dostoevsky's statement about genuine freedom in *Winter Notes*, which is more contemporaneous with *Notes from Underground*:

Understand me: voluntary, completely conscious self-sacrifice imposed by no one, sacrifice of the self for the sake of all, is, in my opinion, a sign of the very highest development of the personality, of the very height of its power, the highest form of self-mastery, the greatest freedom of one's own will [высочайшей свободы собственной воли].²⁸

Clearly, as Scanlan points out, this conception of freedom is totally contrary to the one propounded by the Underground Man; but it is also very different from what is normally meant by the term "freedom" in ordinary discourse. "Real freedom" in Dostoevsky's sense is perfectly compatible with a total lack of personal and civil liberties; one can presumably be morally "the real master of oneself" regardless of one's external circumstances, even within a prison cell. This is much closer to the idea of freedom as autonomy (*auto-nomy*, self-legislation) which was favoured by the German

²⁶ Scanlan quotes only the first sentence, in his own translation (Scanlan, 2003: 75).

²⁷ Dostoevsky, 1994: 883 (PSS 25: 62). Whenever quoting Dostoevsky's Russian I shall cite the Nauka edition of his complete works (1972-1990, *Polnoe Sobranie Sochinenii*, 30 vols, ed. G. M. Fridlender et al., Leningrad: Nauka), abbreviated PSS, followed by volume and page numbers.

²⁸ Dostoevsky, 1988(a): 49 (PSS 5: 79).

Idealists, following Rousseau: one chooses one's own constraints so as to be truly free in a deeper sense.²⁹

For present purposes, it is plainly indispensable to disambiguate the term "freedom" more formally, and in what follows I shall distinguish three varieties. Firstly, I shall refer to what Dostoevsky denigrates with the term "licence" — an absence of all external constraints which permits us to choose to do what we want from among various different possibilities — as "liberty." Secondly, I shall refer to what the Underground Man calls the "most advantageous advantage," his ideal of destructive wilfulness, as "caprice." Thirdly, I shall refer to what Dostoevsky considers to be genuine freedom as "moral autonomy" or "moral freedom." Henceforth, all of these words should be treated as technical terms; I shall continue to define them more fully in what follows.

I do not mean to suggest that these are the only varieties of freedom to be found in Dostoevsky's writings, but only that this conceptual division is the most useful for making sense of the polemics in *Notes from Underground*; this will, I hope, be borne out in what follows. Various scholars have proposed alternative disambiguations. For example, Evgenia Cherkasova has distinguished two notions of freedom in Dostoevsky's work corresponding to two Russian terms, свобода and воля.³⁰ She notes that воля is close in meaning to the German *Willkür*, "arbitrariness" or "power of choice," but claims that it has no precise English equivalent.³¹ Understood this way, it is clearly related to the term "caprice" as I define it. Свобода, on the other hand, is more closely equivalent to "liberty" or "freedom." For Cherkasova's reading of Dostoevsky, the importance of the distinction is not so much semantic as figurative: "*Svoboda* differs from *volia* as a nicely arranged cocktail party differs from an unrestrained, drunken bacchanalia."³² It is worth bearing this verbal distinction in mind since, as we shall see in what follows, Dostoevsky's usage of the terms sometimes indicates what kind

²⁹ Berlin, 2019: 224f.

³⁰ Cherkasova, 2009: 31ff.

³¹ Cherkasova, 2009: 32.

³² Cherkasova, 2009: 34.

of freedom he is referring to; it cannot always be relied upon as a guide to his meaning, however, since he does not define his terms or use them in a fully consistent fashion.³³

Other attempts to discern different kinds of freedom in Dostoevsky's works are less relevant to present purposes. Berdyaev distinguished two varieties: "the first to choose between good and evil" and the second "the freedom that we have in view when it is said that man ought to free himself from lower influences, to have control of his passions, to throw off enslavement to himself and to his environment, and the highest desire for freedom the spirit aims at."³⁴ These would seem to overlap with the concepts of liberty and moral autonomy distinguished above, though not, perhaps, very precisely. Joseph Alulis, on the other hand, distinguishes no less than seven varieties of freedom in Ivan Karamazov's tale of the Grand Inquisitor.³⁵ Richard Avramenko has distinguished two kinds of freedom, which he calls "approximate" and "proximate," but it seems that his distinction may instead best be understood as a distinction between two different ways of trying to make oneself or others free; at bottom, there is only what he calls "factual freedom," which corresponds to what I have called "liberty."³⁶ Robert Louis Jackson mentions at least three kinds of freedom

³³ It is also worth noting that Dostoevsky sometimes uses other relevant terms, such as "разнузданность," meaning *licence* or *libertinism* (as we saw above), and the loanword "каприз," *caprice* (as we shall see below).

³⁴ Berdyaev, 1957: 68, 69.

³⁵ "From the Grand inquisitor's apologia, then, one may collect at least seven meanings of liberty. Being free means: (1) doing whatever one likes; (2) obeying the law; (3) having a share in making the law; (4) deciding for oneself what is right and true; (5) not being determined in one's actions by forces external to one's own will; (6) making and obeying the law for the right reason; (7) being free to decide about what it means to be human. These are, respectively, a kind of natural freedom, moral or social freedom, political freedom, freedom of conscience, freedom of the will, a true natural freedom that is also social and political, and freedom of faith. This history the Grand Inquisitor foretells turns on these seven meanings. The Grant Inquisitor's critique of Christ is that because most human beings, possessed of freedom of the will, and loving to do whatever they like, are incapable of true natural freedom, they may not enjoy either political liberty, or freedom of conscience, with the result that obedience to the law, is stripped of its dignity" (Alulis, 2009: 213).

³⁶ On Avramenko's reading, it seems, Dostoevsky's claim is—rather implausibly—that the best way to obtain "factual freedom," liberty, is to try not to care about it at all but, instead, to immerse oneself in the task of living and acting morally. On this view, to concern oneself with "approximate freedom," that is, with freedom as a goal to be obtained by some effort or

that seem to overlap with the three that I have proposed, as well as what he calls “freedom with” — which seems to refer to the value of community rather than a kind of freedom—but he does not attempt to distinguish or define them with precision.³⁷ None of these disambiguations shed additional light on Dostoevsky’s polemic in *Notes from Underground*, so I shall not consider them in detail, but instead proceed to clarify the ideas of liberty, moral autonomy and caprice. Since what I have called “liberty” is simpler and more familiar, I shall focus primarily on moral autonomy and caprice, and, in the following two sections, investigate these two notions in turn.

3. Moral Autonomy

The traditional notion of Dostoevsky as a champion of freedom is vacuous, unless one specifies precisely what kind of freedom he is supposed to be a champion of. Presumably, Dostoevsky does care to a normal extent about ordinary liberties; he would of course be opposed to locking people up arbitrarily. Moreover, he must surely care about the possibility of manifesting one’s moral autonomy in real action—that is, in morally good actions—which requires at least a measure of liberty.³⁸ But he hardly deserves to be counted a *champion* of what we would normally think of as freedom, an absence of external constraints on our choices, which he thinks amounts

scheme, is a sure way of losing one’s liberty. Avramenko uses Raskolnikov as an illustration: “this is the irony of his actions as a liberator. He killed the old woman in the name of freedom but in doing so, has not only failed to provide a single individual with more freedom, but has also removed his own” (Avramenko, 2013: 172). Raskolnikov’s final liberation would come as a moment at which he ceases to hanker after freedom as a distant goal, and instead dedicate himself, like Sonya, to life in the present.

³⁷ Jackson, 1995.

³⁸ “No doubt every interpretation of the word ‘liberty,’ however unusual, must include a minimum of what I have called ‘negative’ liberty. There must be an area within which I am not frustrated. No society literally suppresses all the liberties of its members; a being who is prevented by others from doing anything at all on his own is not a moral agent at all, and could not either legally or morally be regarded as a human being, even if a physiologist or a biologist, or even a psychologist, felt inclined to classify him as a man” (Berlin, 2017: 207).

only to “licence.” The kind of freedom he really cares about is, as he implies, a moral state rather than a real absence of constraints.³⁹

Indeed, though some personal liberties may be required in order to put one’s moral autonomy into practice—to actually impose morality upon one’s actions, to actually sacrifice oneself for others—it is unlikely that one will thereafter be in a position to enjoy these liberties; they belong among the goods that Dostoevsky expects a morally autonomous person to relinquish (thus Sonya, in *Crime and Punishment*, allows her liberties to be severely curtailed both when she becomes a prostitute to support her family and when she goes into Siberian exile to accompany Raskolnikov).

Nevertheless, the ubiquity of the libertarian reading of Dostoevsky’s rejection of utopian socialism means it is important to address its sources in Dostoevsky’s writings. It takes its impetus not only from *Notes from Underground*, but from other sources as well; I shall here consider two of the most important in turn, *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions* and the Legend of the Grand Inquisitor in *The Brothers Karamazov*.

3.1. Winter Notes

This is the “travel diary” in which Dostoevsky describes his first journey to Western Europe and makes some general observations about morality and social philosophy. Published the year before *Notes from Underground*, it deals with some of the same problems. I shall argue that it does not contain a defence of liberty, or the Libertarian Argument specifically. On the contrary, I argue that Dostoevsky explicitly distances himself from liberalism and rejects the ideal of liberty in his critique of Western politics.

In the context of his observations on French society and culture, Dostoevsky considers socialism and expressly contrasts it with his own ideas about what utopia should look like. He derides the French socialist motto, *liberté, égalité, fraternité*, as an obviously

³⁹ Dostoevsky, 1994: 883; 1988(a): 49.

empty formula, considering the fact that none of these ideals have actually been realised in France after the Revolution.⁴⁰ *Fraternité* interests Dostoevsky in particular. He talks about how genuine brotherhood is impossible in the West, because westerners are hopelessly individualistic. Lacking a natural basis for brotherhood in their society, therefore, the only kind of harmonious community they can try to attain is based on an artificial social contract, which entices people to join together for mutual benefit:

In despair the socialist begins to act, to define a future brotherhood; he calculates the weight and the measure, entices people with the advantages, explains, teaches, and recounts who will receive how much from this brotherhood, how much each will win; he determines what each individual will look like and the burden allotted to each; determines in advance an account of earthly blessings; who will earn how much of them and what each must voluntarily turn over to society in exchange, to the detriment of his individuality.⁴¹

Dostoevsky does not here dispute the attainability of such a society. He even admits that this social ideal, though not a genuine brotherhood by any means, is at least, on the face of it, a good compromise. "Of course," he writes, "there is great attraction in living, if not on a brotherly basis, then on a purely rational basis, that is, in living well, when they guarantee everything and demand only your labour and your consent."⁴² His tone is certainly derisive, but he seems to agree that this is probably the best that Western Europeans can hope for, given their degenerate nature. And the socialists promise this peace and prosperity for each of their citizens in exchange for nothing but "a little drop of his personal freedom [личной свободы] for the sake of the general welfare, a very, very little drop."⁴³ But in spite of all its appeal, Dostoevsky asserts that the socialist cause is hopeless, because the individual will eventually seek to reclaim even the "very, very little drop" of freedom demanded of him by their social contract:

⁴⁰ Dostoevsky, 1988(a): 48.

⁴¹ Dostoevsky, 1988(a): 51.

⁴² Dostoevsky, 1988(a): 51.

⁴³ Dostoevsky, 1988(a): 51 (PSS 5: 81).

In his foolishness it seems to him that this is a prison and that he is better off all by himself, because that way he is free. And in his freedom, you know, he is beaten, he is offered no work, he dies of hunger and he has no freedom at all; and yet it seems to this odd fellow that he is better off with his freedom. Needless to say, the socialist can only spit and tell him he is a fool, an immature adolescent who doesn't understand what is good for him [...].⁴⁴

This “odd fellow” is evidently a forerunner of the Underground Man, an individual who wants all his “freedom” (in all instances воля, “will”) even though it is a false freedom, merely caprice, which is good for nothing, and is simply an expression of disgruntled individualism. Indeed, we might think that the whole polemic against utopian socialism in *Notes from Underground* is merely an elaboration of what this “odd fellow” would say when confronted with the socialist ideal.

However, both Frank and Scanlan read this as an argument for the importance of liberty, and a defence of liberty in the face of socialist authoritarianism. According to Frank, Dostoevsky here “accepts as axiomatic” that socialism encroaches on “the rights of personality” (i.e. free self-expression).⁴⁵ Scanlan, for his part, uses the above quoted passage (omitting the second sentence) to illustrate his claim that for Dostoevsky “[the socialist] utopia cannot be achieved without an unacceptable constriction of individual liberty.”⁴⁶

On the face of it, such readings appear straightforwardly correct. Dostoevsky seems to say that if the socialists demand a sacrifice of liberty, the individual will respond rebelliously, thereby illustrating the overarching importance of liberty in politics. But if we look closely, they become overly simplistic and we can see that Dostoevsky's actual point does not, in fact, correspond to the libertarian reconstruction. We may observe, in particular, that although the individual does rebel in response to a curtailment of liberty, as the argument from freedom predicts, the need for liberty does not

⁴⁴ Dostoevsky, 1988(a): 51 (*PSS* 5: 81).

⁴⁵ Frank, 1986: 245.

⁴⁶ Scanlan, 2003: 162.

play a decisive role here. What is actually happening is that for some unspecified reason, the socialists' demand for a "little drop" of freedom (свобода), which I take to be *liberty*, has provoked in response an unlimited demand for free will (воля), which I read as being equivalent to the Underground Man's demand for *caprice*. That is, even though the "odd fellow" has even less freedom of *any kind* to begin with—"you know, he is beaten, he is offered no work, he dies of hunger and he has no freedom [воля] at all"—he nevertheless refuses to join the socialists. So the need for liberty cannot be what motivates him: such irascibility doesn't make sense as a reaction to a small curtailment of liberty, when the alternative—the absence of a social contract—leads to a state of war in which "might is right" and no liberties are protected. It must be, rather, that like the Underground Man he is motivated by a self-destructive *need for caprice*.

Scanlan would object to this interpretation, because he thinks Dostoevsky agrees with the "odd fellow," and reads Dostoevsky's apparent sympathy for the socialists' hostility towards him as an ironic mockery.⁴⁷ On the contrary, I think that Dostoevsky does not agree with him—just as he doesn't agree with the Underground Man—and only puts him forward as an example of the reaction that socialism must provoke. The tone is certainly sarcastic, as is typical of *Winter Notes*. But it seems to me that Dostoevsky is being honest when he writes of the "odd fellow" that "in his *foolishness* it seems to him that this is a prison"—unlike the Underground Man, Dostoevsky is being charitable to the socialist proposal. He is talking about liberty here, which the socialists really do try to respect: their social contract demands only a "little drop" of liberty for the general good, and indeed offers more in return, in the form of civil liberties which would otherwise be non-existent—without this trade-off the individual *ex hypothesi* "dies of hunger and he has no freedom at all." But the "odd fellow" nevertheless feels this to be a total annihilation of his freedom, and the proposed society to be a prison, because like the Underground Man his idea of freedom is (or becomes) *caprice*, and he therefore feels everything to be an attack on his freedom.

⁴⁷ Scanlan, 2003: 162.

Why he feels this way is not specified; one might suppose that Dostoevsky provides an explanation in *Notes from Underground*.

So, in response to Scanlan's reading, I contend that Dostoevsky's sarcastic tone is not an indication that he is ironically feigning agreement with the socialists' appraisal of the "odd fellow" as a fool in order to ridicule them. Rather, Dostoevsky agrees that the recalcitrant is a fool and doesn't know his own advantage: he would surely be better off with the socialists. Dostoevsky's tone is sarcastic because he alone understands the underlying psychological reasons for this foolish rebellion, and is mocking the reaction of the socialists who can only spit and stamp their feet at the "odd fellow" spoiling their best laid plans, they know not why. By portraying their irritation in a comical light, with a condescendingly sarcastic tone, he jeers at the childish inferiority of their psychological acumen.

Quite apart from its critique of socialism, *Winter Notes* contains some of Dostoevsky's most forceful statements on the topic of freedom. As quoted above, Dostoevsky flatly asserts that "voluntary, completely conscious self-sacrifice imposed by no one" is "the greatest freedom of one's own will."⁴⁸ This would seem to be a clear indication of his rejection of liberalism: he does not regard the ability to choose between various courses of action as true freedom, for there is only one course of action—namely, self-sacrifice—that counts as genuinely free, that is, counts as moral autonomy.

Even here, however, there is grist for the libertarian mill. In particular, Dostoevsky's insistence that this self-sacrifice be "voluntary, completely conscious" and "imposed by no one" is somewhat puzzling. He is clear that one *becomes free* when one sacrifices oneself to others; yet he is also clear that to attain this freedom one must sacrifice oneself voluntarily and must therefore, it seems, *already be free* in order to do so. When he says that self-sacrifice should be "voluntary" and "imposed by no one," is he not

⁴⁸ Dostoevsky, 1988(a): 49.

saying that *liberty* is one of its prerequisites? This seems to support the libertarian reading of Dostoevsky, and to suggest that liberty is, after all, an essential component of his political vision. This paradox is resolved by its context in *Winter Notes*. Dostoevsky is here arguing that the political unity or *fraternité* sought by the French Revolution and the socialists is an impossible dream because of the degraded state of human nature in Western Europe.⁴⁹ The will to sacrifice oneself for the sake of others must, for Dostoevsky, “be present in one’s nature, unconsciously a part of the nature of the whole race.”⁵⁰ A person “must be born with it, or he must have been in the habit from time immemorial.”⁵¹ Although Dostoevsky believes that brotherhood is “a law of nature,” he also warns that human nature can change gradually over long periods of time, and that after centuries of cultural decline Westerners are now *naturally* individualistic; this is why they can only attempt to establish an *artificial* political unity through the socialist theory which entices them to join together out of self-interest.⁵² Russians, by contrast, have preserved their natural inclination towards brotherhood and need not be coaxed into accepting political unity as a compromise or a means of furthering their own interests.

Thus brotherhood is an “imposition” in the West but a spontaneous outgrowth of human nature in Russia. When Dostoevsky insists that self-sacrifice, if it is to constitute true freedom, must be “voluntary” and “imposed by no one,” what he means is that it must spring from human nature rather than being an artificial political construct designed to circumvent the natural tendencies of a given nation. Paradigmatically, the “voluntary” self-sacrifice Dostoevsky views as constitutive of freedom is associated with Russian peasants who, he supposes, devote themselves to one another spontaneously—even automatically—because it is a deeply settled part of their cultural heritage; this is not the kind of informed choice that might be made by an educated and reflective individual who has considered various different courses of

⁴⁹ Dostoevsky, 1988(a): 48ff.

⁵⁰ Dostoevsky, 1988(a): 49.

⁵¹ Dostoevsky, 1988(a): 50.

⁵² Dostoevsky, 1988(a): 50.

action. It is plain that the “voluntary” nature of this sacrifice should not be understood to indicate a condition of liberty. The Russian peasants regarded by Dostoevsky as being most capable of freedom are in fact largely bereft of liberty—deprived of a decent education, living in poverty, and beholden to arbitrary religious and political authorities. Indeed, we may even say that it is precisely *because* they lack the liberties enjoyed or sought by more modern Western populations that the Russian peasants are capable of what Dostoevsky thinks of as genuine freedom: they embody the cultural tradition of Christian altruism without being in a position to question it.

So we can see that Dostoevsky’s ideal of freedom is compatible with a high degree of political despotism because it does not depend on the existence of personal or civil liberties. In practice, there is only one course open to the “free” individual, namely, self-sacrifice in imitation of Christ; and this course of action is open to all people regardless of their economic and political circumstances.

3.2. The Grand Inquisitor

The other most important source for the libertarian reading of Dostoevsky is the tale of the Grand Inquisitor. Commonly known as the “Legend of the Grand Inquisitor,” this is a story told by Ivan to Alyosha in *The Brothers Karamazov*. It is set in fifteenth century Spain and describes the interrogation of Christ, who had made an unexpected appearance on the streets of Seville, by the Grand Inquisitor, who threatens to burn him at the stake for heresy. The Inquisitor argues, apparently in direct contradiction of the Underground Man, that the one thing human beings cannot endure is freedom: “I tell you, man has no preoccupation more nagging than to find the person to whom that unhappy creature may surrender the gift of freedom with which he is born. But only he can take mastery of people’s freedom who can put their consciences at rest.”⁵³ He blames Christ for having wanted to preserve this freedom, so as to allow humans to choose goodness of their own volition: “Instead of taking mastery of people’s

⁵³ Dostoevsky, 2003(d): 332.

freedom, you have increased that freedom even further! [...] you augmented it and saddled the spiritual kingdom of man with it forever. You desired that man's love should be free [...]."⁵⁴ The Grand Inquisitor argues that this is impossible, that the demand for a voluntary pursuit of goodness is unreasonable considering the inherent weakness of the human will. His ultimate goal, which he thinks Christ's appearance will impede, is to establish a utopian kingdom in which people will no longer be troubled by freedom and the agonising questions of moral responsibility it entails.

The first question to ask, in light of the distinctions made above, is: what kind of freedom (свобода throughout⁵⁵) does the Grand Inquisitor think is unendurable and want to take away from humanity? What kind of freedom does Christ implicitly represent and defend against him? Readers interested in the political dimension of the story typically invoke the concept of liberty. Joseph Alulis, for example, writes that "'The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor' is as eloquent a defense of liberty as was written in the nineteenth century," and that "Jesus appears in the Legend as the advocate of human liberty."⁵⁶ He takes Dostoevsky to be a champion of political liberties in the tradition of Alexis de Tocqueville, who, along with John Stuart Mill and other such figures, can be regarded as founding fathers of modern liberalism.⁵⁷ Alulis admits that Dostoevsky's strict Christian moralism is "hardly compatible with modern liberalism," but, nevertheless, insists that "if liberalism means a commitment to liberty, including political liberty, as essential to a good human society, then Dostoevsky is a liberal thinker."⁵⁸ Scanlan likewise appears to read the Grand Inquisitor's attack on "freedom" as an attack on *liberty*, for he formulates the Inquisitor's utopian vision as a "combination of material well-being with contentment in the form of willing consent to be regimented."⁵⁹ Regimentation is a kind of external constraint, and thus a restriction of liberty; it is perfectly compatible, as Scanlan implies, with the kind of

⁵⁴ Dostoevsky, 2003(d): 332.

⁵⁵ PSS 14: 224-241.

⁵⁶ Alulis, 2009: 206.

⁵⁷ See, e.g., Berlin, 2017: 211.

⁵⁸ Alulis, 2009: 207.

⁵⁹ Scanlan, 2003: 188.

moral freedom needed in order to consent to it. So Scanlan also seems to think that the kind of freedom humans cannot endure, according to the Grand Inquisitor, is liberty.

The authoritarian designs of the Grand Inquisitor are obviously illiberal; this does not mean, however, that the elimination of liberty is his primary ambition. It is, I think, merely a means to an end. For what he ultimately wants to destroy, and what he thinks humans cannot endure, is evidently more closely related to the kind of freedom Dostoevsky stated was the most important in *Winter Notes*: freedom of moral conscience. We can see from the Grand Inquisitor's statements that his final goal is the subjugation of conscience to an absolute moral authority (himself), and so the destruction of moral autonomy; consider, for example, the following passage, in which he defines the problem of freedom which concerns him:

There is for man no preoccupation more constant and more nagging than, while in a condition of freedom, quickly to find someone to bow down before. But man seeks to bow down before that which is already beyond dispute, so far beyond dispute that all human beings will instantly agree to a universal bowing-down before it. [...] For the sake of a universal bowing down they have destroyed one another with the sword. They have created gods and challenged one another: 'Give up your gods and come and worship ours or else death to you and to your gods!'⁶⁰

As I understand it, this "bowing down" is not consent to be politically regimented, it is a submission to *moral* authority. According to the Grand Inquisitor, people need an authority to replace their conscience, and they need to recognise this authority unanimously, so that they can be told once and for all, with no further possibility of doubt or debate, that this is right, that is wrong, and there is no longer any need to torment themselves with question of good and evil. It must be that this state of moral indeterminacy—reliance on a free conscience—is the "condition of freedom" which he thinks

⁶⁰ Dostoevsky, 2003(d): 331.

humans cannot endure, which shows that moral autonomy rather than liberty is the kind of freedom which the Inquisitor wants to eliminate.

Furthermore, the Grand Inquisitor is well aware that humans enjoy liberty, and so he intends, in order to keep them contented, to *grant* them various additional liberties in his future utopia:

Yes, we shall make them work, but in their hours of freedom from work we shall arrange their lives like a childish game [...]. Oh, we shall permit them sin, too, they are weak and powerless, and they will love us like children for letting them sin.⁶¹

There is no reason to think that his list of human needs is any different from the socialists' list of advantages described in *Notes from Underground*, "prosperity, wealth, *freedom*, peace, and so on and so forth."⁶² And he intends to fulfil all of these needs, including liberty, to the extent needed to make people happy. It cannot be that he wants to eliminate liberty, therefore, or that he thinks it is unendurable for human beings. In effect, all the Grand Inquisitor wants is to supplant the human conscience with his own authority. The temporary elimination of liberties—harsh suppression and policing—is merely the means he uses to achieve this end.

In the Legend of the Grand Inquisitor, it seems, Dostoevsky is not primarily concerned with socialism or social regimentation, or liberty in general. He is concerned with the elimination of freedom of conscience, which, being the foundation of the moral autonomy central to his own Christian utopian ideal, is far more important to him. A libertarian reader might respond that an overarching concern for the preservation of liberty is implied by the fact that liberty is, after all, what the draconian Grand Inquisitor spends most of his time curtailing. Scanlan suggests that an ineradicable need for liberty is foiling the Grand Inquisitor's utopian plans, just as, in his interpretations of *Notes from Underground* and *Winter Notes*, he suggests that such a

⁶¹ Dostoevsky, 2003(d): 338.

⁶² Dostoevsky, 2001: 15. My italics.

need foils the plans of the utopian socialists. Following this suggestion, one might think that the Grand Inquisitor is, as a matter of fact, basically engaged in a struggle against *liberty*, notwithstanding the fact that he takes himself to be grappling primarily with the moral autonomy of his subjects. Scanlan points to the fact that the Inquisitor's ideal is still far from being realized even after centuries of work, and that his organisation is having to resort more than ever to brute force in order to maintain its authority:

By his person and behaviour, the Grand Inquisitor gives the lie to his own theories of peace and prosperity through willing slavery — theories thus shown to be nothing more than rationalizations of his own arrogant willfulness. Once again, then, Dostoevsky has brought home his conviction that the universal material prosperity sought by the socialists cannot be achieved without protest and suppression. On this point, the Underground Man was right and the Grand Inquisitor wrong, as the latter's own activity revealed.⁶³

The tension which Scanlan perceives between the Grand Inquisitor's theories and his practice suggests, he thinks, that the need for liberty is an insurmountable obstacle to the realisation of his plans. This in turn suggests that Dostoevsky is concerned in Ivan's story to highlight the notion that attacks on freedom of thought and conscience ultimately boil down to attacks on individual liberties. However, I think this misconstrues the problems faced by the Grand Inquisitor.

As I understand him, he is much more worried about the allure of freedom of mind and conscience, moral autonomy, than the allure of liberty: "There is nothing more seductive for man than the freedom of his conscience," he says explicitly.⁶⁴ He is worried about the "pride" which makes ordinary people think, wrongly, that they can decide autonomously to do the right thing. As he says to Christ: "Oh, we shall persuade them at last not to be proud, for you bore them up and by doing so taught them to be proud; we shall prove to them that they are feeble, that they are merely pathetic

⁶³ Scanlan, 2003: 189.

⁶⁴ Dostoevsky, 2003(d): 332.

children, but that childish happiness is sweeter than all others.”⁶⁵ By suggesting that ordinary humans can follow his moral example of their own volition, Christ gives humanity an unrealistic idea of its own capacities which, ultimately, leads people like the utopian socialists to imagine that they can build utopia with their own free minds and science: “Oh, centuries yet will pass of the excesses of the free intellect.”⁶⁶ But when people have realised their mistake, and with the help of the Grand Inquisitor have lost this pride, “their minds will grow timid,” and moral autonomy will lose its appeal.⁶⁷ They will cease to be led astray by utopian dreams, and they will gladly submit to his moral dominion; at this point, suppression will no longer be necessary, and liberties can be restored. The Grand Inquisitor has no problem with liberty in and of itself, for it is only dangerous in combination with moral autonomy. Once moral autonomy has been eliminated, liberty can be reinstated and even increased in certain directions, because it will no longer provoke the psychological backlash of the conscience—people will then be able to “sin” without internal conflict. They will be able to turn to their shepherd the Inquisitor, who, as supreme moral authority, will absolve them, and they will be happy.⁶⁸ In sum, the tale of the Grand Inquisitor reveals Dostoevsky’s concern for the preservation of moral autonomy, rather than any special concern with defending liberty against authoritarianism, even if the suppression of liberty is a conspicuous element of its plot.⁶⁹

Having clarified the idea of moral autonomy, distinguished it from liberty, and argued that moral autonomy and not liberty is Dostoevsky’s preferred variety of freedom, I now proceed to consider the Underground Man’s ideal of caprice.

⁶⁵ Dostoevsky, 2003(d): 337.

⁶⁶ Dostoevsky, 2003(d): 336.

⁶⁷ Dostoevsky, 2003(d): 337.

⁶⁸ Dostoevsky, 2003(d): 338.

⁶⁹ One can also note that the most important source for the story, the Grand Inquisitor in Schiller’s *Don Carlos*, is also primarily concerned with moral autonomy, or freedom of conscience, rather than political liberty (see Schiller, 2003: 295ff.).

4. Caprice

The Underground Man states that freedom is the “most advantageous advantage,” that is, the most important thing; this is taken by libertarian readers to mean that he regards *liberty* as the most advantageous advantage, and in particular as more important than the material gains promised by utopian socialists. Nevertheless, it is clear that when the Underground Man calls freedom the most advantageous advantage, he is referring to caprice, and not liberty. Scanlan points out that he does, it is true, claim that “what everyone needs more deeply than anything else” is “the exercise of free choice, action according to one’s own independent will.”⁷⁰ But this independence of will does not merely demand liberty, but ultimately amounts, as Scanlan also quotes the Underground Man as saying, to nothing more than “one’s own caprice, even the wildest, one’s own fancy, though inflamed sometimes to the point of madness.”⁷¹

In its political implications, the Underground Man’s notion of freedom is so extreme that it is plainly incompatible not only with Chernyshevsky’s utopia, or with other more regimented societies, as libertarians point out, but with Dostoevsky’s ideal of brotherhood founded on moral autonomy as well. To be sure, the socialists proposed an especially neat social order, the “ant hill” in which all behaviour is rational and goal-directed, and it is no wonder that the Underground Man takes particular exception to their designs. But had he encountered, for example, a copy of Dostoevsky’s *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions*, his reaction would have been even more scathing. Dostoevsky’s utopian ideal, the universal Christian brotherhood, is not founded on strictly *rational* behaviour, but it does depend on strictly *moral* behaviour: its members must devote themselves fully to carrying out the Christian moral law. This would have been totally unacceptable to the Underground Man, who writes:

⁷⁰ Scanlan, 2003: 71.

⁷¹ Scanlan, 2003: 71. Dostoevsky, 2001: 19.

Where did these sages ever get the idea that man needs any normal, virtuous desire? How did they ever imagine that man needs any kind of rational, advantageous desire? Man needs only one thing—his own *independent* desire, whatever that independence might cost and wherever it might lead.⁷²

So, not only does the Underground Man take issue with the constraints of rationality, he states *explicitly* that morality is equally insignificant compared to the power of “independent” desire. It is perhaps not easy to get to grips with what the Underground Man is claiming. The “independence” of desire is not here construed as a freedom from external constraints, like parental authority or government censorship, but rather as a “freedom” from virtue and even reason itself—things which we normally think of as being *constitutive* of our desires. Normally, we have desires like “I want a new pair of shoes,” which are goal-directed and *include*, tacitly at least, limitations on the range of their possible fulfilments. These limitations are imposed by reason and by morality, and are perfectly compatible with freedom of will as we normally think of it; they don’t count as constraints on our liberty. Under normal circumstances, we certainly do not have desires like “I want a new pair of shoes, whatever the cost and wherever it might lead!” There are certain things any normal desire for shoes cannot entail, like murder (which would violate morality) or eating fifty bananas while hanging upside down in the hope that some shoes will fall from the sky (which would violate rationality). And yet this kind of insane desire is the only variety which the Underground Man contends is truly important to human beings.

This kind of radical “independence” means that genuinely free will, for the Underground Man, can only be the purest whim or caprice, with no apparent *foundation* either within or without the individual. This is why he even takes issue with mathematical statements like *two times two is four*, which he finds psychologically oppressive because of their strict necessity: “Two times two makes four—why, in my opinion, it’s mere insolence. Two times two makes four stands there brazenly with its

⁷² Dostoevsky, 2001: 19.

hands on its hips, blocking your path and spitting on you.”⁷³ He experiences everything which limits the range of his caprice, even if it is perfectly compatible with his liberty, as a direct attack on his personal sovereignty. “After all,” he writes, “I’m not standing up for suffering here, nor for well-being, either. I’m standing up for... my own whim and for its being guaranteed to me whenever necessary.”⁷⁴ He wants to be able to act to his own disadvantage, to be able to believe that two times two is five.

Jackson has devoted some attention to the concept of caprice (or what, following Dostoevsky in the *House of the Dead*, he calls “convulsions”) but, it seems to me, has not completely distinguished it from either liberty or moral autonomy. In the first place, he does not consistently distinguish caprice from mere irrationalism: we should not forget that the Underground Man finds *morality* no less repulsive than reason.⁷⁵ Nevertheless, it is clear that Jackson recognizes the existence of a distinction between Dostoevsky’s ideal of moral freedom and the caprice favoured by the Underground Man (and attained by the manic convicts), as can be seen in the following statement:

In sum, then, we can distinguish in *Notes from the House of the Dead* two kinds of freedom or self-expression: the one self-willed and manifested in beating in frenzy at the cover of the coffin in an effort to obtain an illusion of self-determination and self-mastery, an illusion of freedom; the other an experience of integrity, communion, harmony and symbolic liberation from the death house.⁷⁶

At this point, Jackson goes on to describe the notion of genuine moral autonomy advocated by Dostoevsky in *Winter Notes*, that is, freedom defined as altruism and self-sacrifice. This is evidently meant to be an elaboration of the second, good kind of freedom Jackson identifies in *The House of the Dead*. Now, according to Jackson, manic

⁷³ Dostoevsky, 2001: 24. This mathematical equation was at the time a popular symbol for rationalism and nihilism (Paperno, 1988: 168), but it seems clear that the Underground Man uses it not only to allude to his nihilist opponents, but as an example of mathematical necessity more generally.

⁷⁴ Dostoevsky, 2001: 25.

⁷⁵ Jackson, 1958: 30.

⁷⁶ Jackson, 1995: 10f.

“convulsions” grant the convicts an illusion of freedom—but of what *kind* of freedom are they supposed to be an illusion? The quote above suggests, rather improbably, that it grants them an illusion of moral autonomy. But Jackson does not clearly distinguish between liberty and moral autonomy, and the following statement suggests that he takes capricious outbursts to grant convicts the illusion of a complex freedom consisting of both moral autonomy and liberty:

[Dostoevsky] does not in any sense suggest that the convict experiences what for him was the highest ethical and spiritual freedom. Yet Dostoevsky’s thought is clear: the human being at all times needs to *feel* free. [...] Without this feeling—however illusory—he would not consent to live. Freedom here is embodied in self-expression.⁷⁷

The “highest ethical and spiritual freedom” is presumably the altruism described by Dostoevsky in *Winter Notes*, and the “self-expression” in which this freedom is embodied is presumably dependent upon liberty. In any case, Jackson certainly seems to include moral autonomy in the species of freedom—whatever else it may include—that the convicts enjoy an illusion of. But this seems implausible, because the caprice indulged in by the convicts does not bear any resemblance to the altruism and self-denial constitutive of the moral autonomy; we cannot suppose that their wild drinking bouts grant the convicts any sense of “integrity, communion, harmony” etc., however illusory, for an illusion must *resemble* that which it is an illusion of. Jackson could refer with somewhat more plausibility to liberty: through indulging in caprice, he could say, the convicts experience an illusion of liberty, that is, the kind of freedom they enjoyed—to some limited extent—when they were not in prison. Again, however, it is unclear how drunken abandon can really take the place of liberty: *qua* drunkenness, it might allow to the convicts to *forget* the fact that they have *no* liberty; *qua* wanton abandon or caprice, however, I cannot see that it would go any way towards persuading them that they *do* have liberties they don’t in fact have.

⁷⁷ Jackson, 1995: 5.

I would argue that the kind of freedom enjoyed or sought by capricious individuals like the Underground Man should not be thought of merely as an approximation to liberty, or an extreme love of liberty, or “libertinism” understood as a tendency to ignore the requirements of law, decency or decorum—in short, that it should not be defined with reference to the idea of liberty. It is a completely different kind of freedom, even though it can sometimes manifest in similar ways. In the writings of some liberals—for example, Tocqueville’s—the love of liberty can almost become capricious, since it can become so heated as to scorn common sense, bourgeois virtues and “normal advantages” such as material prosperity:

What has always kindled such a powerful love of liberty in the hearts of certain men is its intrinsic attractiveness, its inherent charm, independent of its benefits. [...] Whoever seeks in liberty anything other than liberty itself is born for servitude. Some people pursue it doggedly through peril and misery of every variety. [...] What? The very desire to be free. Do not ask me to analyze that sublime desire; you must feel it. It finds its way unaided into great hearts that God has prepared to receive it. It fills them; it inflames them. To mediocre souls that have never felt it, one cannot hope to make it comprehensible.⁷⁸

Such exaltations notwithstanding, Tocqueville is not describing the kind of freedom that interests the Underground Man. The maximization of liberty involves the casting off of external constraints such as despots, prisons, regulations etc. But caprice is—or rather aims towards—a much more total independence of the will from everything beyond itself, including not only external constraints but also sources of motivation that are internal to the agent, such as morality and rationality. Taken to the extreme, this kind of independence amounts to an omnipotence usually denied even to God: at his most capricious the Underground Man would only be satisfied if everything he happened to desire, even if it were completely insane or even *logically* impossible, came to pass immediately. The maximally capricious individual attempts to think and

⁷⁸ Tocqueville, 2011: 151.

act as if he or she were omnipotent in this sense, even if it is obvious that this way of living is bound to be disastrous.

This is clearly not the kind of freedom that Tocqueville is talking about. Indeed, because it is so extreme, one is hard pressed to find any historical precedent for the Underground Man's ideal of caprice. The kind of freedom he demands is incomprehensible to most philosophers, to whom it would never occur that anyone could ever desire it. "No one is so insane," writes August Comte, "as to set himself up, knowingly, in revolt against the nature of things. No one takes pleasure in undertaking a course of action which he sees clearly must be ephemeral."⁷⁹ And yet this is precisely what the Underground Man claims is the most desirable thing of all, the most important right of every human being!

Perhaps unexpectedly, we find that one of the *philosophes* does appreciate the kind of freedom demanded by the Underground Man, namely the Baron d'Holbach, whose 1770 *System of Nature* (the "atheist's bible") is an ancestor of Chernyshevsky's *Anthropological Principle in Philosophy* and other materialist tracts.⁸⁰ But d'Holbach's appreciation counts for little, because, though he agrees with the Underground Man's definition of freedom as the total absence of limitations, he takes this notion to be an obvious absurdity, and thereby denies the possibility of free will altogether: "For man to have free agency," he writes, "it would require that he should be able to will or choose without motive, or that he should prevent motives coercing his will."⁸¹ This is a statement that the Underground Man would agree with, since caprice demands that the will should motivate itself without interference from reason, morals etc. However, since it is clear to d'Holbach that such an independence from motives would be completely undesirable even if—which he doubts—it was possible, he can hardly be considered a predecessor of the Underground Man.

⁷⁹ Comte, 1998: 101.

⁸⁰ Frank, 1990: 68.

⁸¹ D'Holbach, 1999: 141.

Other eighteenth- and nineteenth-century philosophers are far less sympathetic. The Marquis de Condorcet explicitly denies the possibility of action without motive: “To speak abstractly of indifference is absurd, because if you assume there is no determining motivation, you are assuming that the action is not determined. Man himself necessarily determines his actions in accordance with the strongest motivation.”⁸² And as Kant writes of romantic “geniuses” who suppose they can extend their mastery through the abandonment of principles: “if reason does not wish to be subject to the law which it imposes on itself, it must bow beneath the yoke of laws which someone else imposes on it; for nothing—not even the greatest absurdity—can continue to operate for long without some kind of law.”⁸³ The Underground Man demands precisely such lawlessness.

One of the closest historical precedents for the Underground Man’s idea of caprice would seem to be Max Stirner’s theory of egoism or “ownness,” presented in his influential work *The Ego and Its Own* (1844).⁸⁴ Stirner moved in the same circle as Marx and Engels, and developed his philosophy in opposition to the “Young Hegelians” and other progressive intellectuals, all of whom he regarded as insufficiently radical in their break with the past. Like the Underground Man, Stirner sets himself up as an opponent of the multifarious “lovers of humanity”—as the Underground Man would say—including rationalists, progressives, liberals, socialists, communists, and so on. He regards all of these philosophies as relics of outdated traditions and espouses an extreme form of personal independence that precludes devotion to political ideals, no matter how benevolent or progressive they may seem, simply because he regards

⁸² Condorcet, 2012: 182. Rather than deny the possibility of freedom for this reason, as d’Holbach does, he redefines it: freedom is nothing but the experience of having more than one competing sentiment, and “Freedom ceases when there is just one desire to which the will succumbs automatically” (Condorcet, 2012: 181f.).

⁸³ Kant, 1991: 247.

⁸⁴ To my knowledge, Dostoevsky never mentions Stirner explicitly, but he was familiar with Stirner’s ideas. According to Frank, Stirner was hotly debated in the radical circles of Dostoevsky’s youth (Frank, 1986: 298), and since he is mentioned and alluded to by Apollon Grigoryev in works published in Dostoevsky’s journals, it seems that his theories were still considered worthy of note for the *pochvenniki* in the 1860s (Grigoryev, 1962: 88, 130, 147f.).

devotion itself as a form of degradation. Because of its apparent proximity to the Underground Man's ideal of caprice, it is worth considering Stirner's theory of "ownness" in some detail so as to emphasize the peculiarities of the former.

In a dialectical account of the development of human individuality, Stirner describes reason as the primary obstacle to full and independent maturity. Reason becomes a constraint when we cease to be "children" and learn to subordinate ourselves to principles. In childhood, he says, we do not pay attention to reason: "We are not to be persuaded to anything by *conviction*, and are deaf to good arguments and principles"; we respond only to physical threats and rewards, and aren't forced to grapple with the compulsion of rational arguments.⁸⁵ "This stern life-and-death combat with *reason* enters later, and begins a new phase," he writes; "in childhood we scamper about without racking our brains much."⁸⁶ This condition of childhood comes to an end when we realize that we are *rational* entities whose minds are not beholden to the complaints of the body—or beholden, therefore, to those who have power over the body, such as father, church and state. These sources of authority are thus dispensed with, and the child becomes an idealistic youth capable of withstanding worldly torments with sublime detachment:

By degrees we get at what is behind everything that was mysterious and uncanny to us, the mysteriously dreaded might of the rod, the father's stern look, etc., and behind all we find our ataraxia—our imperturbability, intrepidity, our counter forces, our odds of strength, our invincibility.⁸⁷

The discovery of our sublime independence from all earthly powers, our Stoic ataraxia, belongs to a new understanding of ourselves as spiritual, mental or rational beings: "From this high standpoint everything '*earthly*' recedes into contemptible remoteness; for the standpoint is—the *heavenly*."⁸⁸ Stirner's description conforms not

⁸⁵ Stirner, 1995: 14.

⁸⁶ Stirner, 1995: 14.

⁸⁷ Stirner, 1995: 14.

⁸⁸ Stirner, 1995: 15.

only to Platonic, Stoic, Christian and Kantian notions of the self or soul, but also to the romantic idealism that captivated the Underground Man in his youth and led him to renounce worldly prosperity in favour of the higher goods of taste and virtue, as we shall see in the following chapters. The condition of ataraxia is reinforced through devotion to principles of one kind or another; the youth withstands bodily and emotional discomfort *in the name of* religion, virtue, liberty, patriotism, or some other nexus of ideals. He subjects himself willingly to such principles because he takes them to be matters of principle or “conscience,” and thus unquestionable:

As in childhood one had to overcome the resistance of the *laws of the world*, so now in everything that he proposes he is met by an objection of the mind, of reason, of his *own conscience*. ‘That is unreasonable, un-Christian, unpatriotic,’ and the like, cries conscience to us, and — frightens us away from it. Not the might of the avenging Eumenides, not Poseidon’s wrath, not God, far as he sees the hidden, not the father’s rod of punishment, do we fear, but — *conscience*.⁸⁹

Of course, it is only because we believe such matters of conscience to be unconditionally binding that they can serve to liberate us from worldly authorities: if they were not unconditionally binding, then we would be able to weigh them against other considerations, such as happiness and prosperity, and thus be drawn back into the maelstrom of childhood; their special dignity consists in their immunity from such weighing procedures. For Stirner, this is very much a mixed blessing. That which liberated him from the external world becomes another constraint on the individual insofar as it is a source of absolute and unquestionable moral and intellectual principles.

Our ideals are, for Stirner, “spooks” that emanate from our own or others’ thoughts and then, solidified as fixed principles, return to haunt us as laws apparently imposed from outside; adherents and devotees of all kinds are “possessed” by their ideals.⁹⁰ The special dignity of all lofty principles is an illusion caused by the fact that we have forgotten their origins—we take them to have some kind of divine or universal

⁸⁹ Stirner, 1995: 15.

⁹⁰ Stirner, 1995: 35.

authority, when in fact they are merely the ossified remains of our own former whims, or those of our ancestors. Even if we wholeheartedly endorse a moral principle at one time, there is of course no guarantee that it will not come into conflict with our desires and aspirations at other times, and, quite naturally, it then becomes a constraint. Stirner completely rejects the Kantian idea that laws are not constraints as long as they are self-imposed, as long as they are *our* principles. If they really were *our* principles, Stirner thinks, we would be able to control and dispense with them at will; but we cannot do so because they command unconditional respect. In passing from downtrodden childhood to headstrong youth, therefore, we merely trade one source of authority for another—the physical might of the father is replaced by the spiritual might of our principles.

So far, Stirner seems to be in agreement with the Underground Man, who also demands the independence of the will from all principles, which, though internal to the agent, he too regards as constraints no less effective than chains and prison cells. This agreement continues into Stirner's attack on modern rationalism. As well as being the spiritual source of all ideals, reason is the source of scientific progress and criticism, and it is reason in this narrower capacity that Stirner takes to be the most common object of devotion among progressive thinkers of all stripes. Reason was the well-spring of Enlightenment humanism; it was supposed to undermine the arbitrary and unjustified authority of tradition, church and state. But in the process it became just another "cause," *rationalism*, which distracted individual people from their own concerns; indeed, it distracted them from the concerns of every real person, and led them to adopt the spurious cause of "humanity" in general, a "spook" of the same order as God or the king: it "puts the individual man in irons by the *thought of humanity*."⁹¹ In a phrase redolent of the Underground Man, Stirner writes that "reason is a book full

⁹¹ Stirner, 1995: 95.

of laws, which are all enacted against egoism.”⁹² Thus “if reason rules, then the *person* succumbs.”⁹³

The difference between Stirner and the Underground Man is, however, fully revealed in the former’s critique of liberalism and the ideal of freedom. Stirner asserts that the pursuit of liberty, taken to its logical conclusion, amounts to an absurdity:

I have no objection to freedom, but I wish more than freedom for you
[...]. Free—from what? Oh! What is there that cannot be shaken off?
[...] However, the freer I become, the more compulsion piles up before
my eyes; and the more impotent I feel myself. The unfree son of the
wilderness does not yet feel anything of all the limits that crowd a civ-
ilized man: he seems to himself freer than this latter. In the measure
that I conquer freedom for myself I create for myself new bounds and
new tasks: if I have invented railways, I feel myself weak again because
I cannot yet sail through the skies like the bird; and, if I have solved a
problem whose obscurity disturbed my mind, at once there await me
innumerable others, whose perplexities impede my progress, dim my
free gaze, make the limits of my *freedom* painfully sensible to me.⁹⁴

For Stirner, perfect freedom is an impossibility, and those who seek it are misguided or insane. One can become free of many things, but not everything—absolute freedom is impossible for finite, earthly beings. Yet this kind of absolute freedom is precisely what the Underground Man considers “the most advantageous advantage.” Of course, he too is aware that this ideal is an absurdity, but, as far as he is concerned, that is not a good reason to reject it. Even more absurd would be to reject an ideal simply because it is impossible—“Oh, absurdity of absurdities!”⁹⁵—for the intrinsic desirability of an object should surely be determined without reference to the conditions of its actuality. Thus, initial appearances to the contrary, Stirner’s egoistic ideal of “ownness” is plainly a far cry from the Underground Man’s ideal of caprice. Stirner’s main difference with the Underground Man concerns his rejection of

⁹² Stirner, 1995: 293.

⁹³ Stirner, 1995: 95.

⁹⁴ Stiner, 1995: 142.

⁹⁵ Dostoevsky, 2001: 10.

absolute freedom as an idle fancy of the imagination and a pale substitute for the true self-possession or “ownness” of the mature egoist.

5. Evaluating the Libertarian Interpretation

So far, I have distinguished and clarified three very different varieties of freedom: *liberty*, the absence of externally imposed constraints that would prevent one from choosing between various different courses of action (or ways of life more generally) according to one’s own preferences; *caprice*, the mad desire or attempt to live without internal or external limitations of any kind; and *moral autonomy*, the self-imposition of moral constraints, amounting to the altruistic sacrifice of oneself (including one’s liberties) for the sake of others. Caprice is favoured by the Underground Man, moral autonomy is favoured by Dostoevsky, and liberty is largely disregarded by both.

The neglect of such distinctions naturally leads to confusion. Scanlan’s talk of “the importance of freedom in Dostoevsky’s worldview,”⁹⁶ for instance, is quite misleading; since in the context of this statement he is considering the extent to which the Underground Man is voicing Dostoevsky’s own opinions, Scanlan would seem to be implying that Dostoevsky agrees with the Underground Man’s appraisal of freedom *to some extent*, but this would be incorrect because “freedom” in this context means *caprice*, which Dostoevsky does not value at all. Indeed, it’s clear that Dostoevsky completely rejects the Underground Man’s ideal of caprice.

More importantly, the meaning of the *Libertarian Argument* attributed to Dostoevsky by Frank, Jackson and Scanlan can now be clarified. The argument depends on the

⁹⁶ “Where Dostoevsky parts company with the Underground Man, of course, is in the appraisal of this egoistic insistence on boundless freedom. For all the importance of free choice in Dostoevsky’s worldview, when the Underground Man proceeds to the normative dimension of Rational Egoism and characterizes freedom itself as man’s ‘most advantageous advantage,’ we cannot assume the he is still echoing Dostoevsky’s own convictions” (Scanlan, 2003: 75).

idea that freedom is in general more important to human beings than material comfort and social harmony, such that a socialist utopia which sought to attain these things on the basis of a limitation of freedom would necessarily fail. But this argument is ambiguous; what kind of freedom is at issue here? It is plainly what I have called liberty, the absence of external constraints on the number of one's options and one's ability to choose between them. We should now understand the Libertarian Argument as follows:⁹⁷

1. Humans have an ineradicable need for liberty, which is in general stronger than all other needs. People who feel their liberty to be threatened will do anything to preserve it. In a mad attempt to recover an illusion of their lost liberty, they will become dangerously capricious.
2. Utopian socialism threatens liberty.
3. Therefore, utopian socialism will cause people to become capricious.

The question is, then, whether the Libertarian Argument so understood can be extracted from *Notes from Underground*. As stated above, I shall address this question properly in the following two chapters. Here I shall first consider a more general reason for doubting the libertarian reading: attributing the Libertarian Argument to Dostoevsky renders his overall social-philosophical thought incoherent. Dostoevsky *cannot* coherently believe in the Libertarian Argument for the simple reason that it contradicts his own utopian ideal. We are to suppose that the problem with utopian socialism is that it constrains liberty. But it is easy to see that Dostoevsky's own social ideal is also threatened by this problem: his Christian brotherhood is characterised by a *total* sacrifice of liberty, which is far greater than the "little drop" demanded by socialists. If the need for liberty is *ineradicable*, as the Libertarian Argument suggests, then Dostoevsky surely cannot expect his brotherhood to do any better than the socialist utopia; indeed, he should expect it to be much less feasible. And yet he clearly doesn't think this way.

⁹⁷ Compare with the initial formulation on page 23, above.

It is surely noteworthy that Chernyshevsky explicitly advocates the very principle that, according to the libertarian reading, Dostoevsky devises as an argument against him: "*foolish acts*," he writes, "are committed only in two cases: either in the heat of the moment, a fleeting burst of passion, or *when a person is deprived of freedom and is irritated by restraint*."⁹⁸ Here Chernyshevsky himself states the core of the Libertarian Argument: people become capricious when deprived of liberty. Libertarian readers of Dostoevsky may take this in their stride, and point to the irony of Dostoevsky's turning Chernyshevsky's own idea against him. It seems to me, however, that Chernyshevsky has *at least* as much right to argue this point against Dostoevsky, as Dostoevsky has to argue it against Chernyshevsky. If the need for liberty causes problems for Chernyshevsky, it must cause problems for Dostoevsky too. So, interpretations like those of Frank and Scanlan are faced with the problem of reconciling Dostoevsky's argument against utopian socialism with his own utopian ideal. In fact, Scanlan seems to perceive this difficulty at two separate places in his book, and attempts to circumvent it in two distinct ways, which I shall now briefly consider in turn.

5.1. Scanlan's First Solution

Scanlan's first engagement with the problem occurs as part of his discussion of Dostoevsky's own utopian ideal. In this instance, Scanlan attempts to explain why Dostoevsky's utopia is so constituted that it escapes from the purview of the Libertarian Argument. He claims that Dostoevsky's utopia doesn't *really* demand a sacrifice of liberty, because, being good Christians, his citizens *willingly* give up their liberty. As such, he writes:

The ineradicable human desire for freedom is not a threat to the stability of the social structure as it was for the socialists, because no coercion is exercised over the individual. All are genuinely free because each

⁹⁸ Chernyshevsky, 1989: 397. Italics added.

individual wishes the well-being of others and willingly accepts whatever limitations of his activity are required to assure that well-being.⁹⁹

There are two problems with this explanation. The first, which Scanlan does take into consideration, is that the socialists certainly don't intend to exercise coercion over their citizens; like Dostoevsky, they expect willing cooperation. The whole point of their utopian model, founded as it is on rational egoism, is that by definition it appeals to what people *want* and therefore ought to attract willing participants. As Chernyshevsky himself describes his utopian ideal (the "Crystal Palace" depicted in *What is to Be Done?*): "But you see that every kind of happiness exists here, whatever anyone desires. Everyone lives as he desires; each and every person has complete will, yes, free will."¹⁰⁰ And again, he has one of his heroes assert that "I make it a rule that nothing should ever be done to help a person against his own will. Freedom comes before everything else, even life itself."¹⁰¹ Chernyshevsky also insists that although most people will live in his "Crystal Palaces" in the future—because this is what, he assumes, most people will prefer—there may always be a minority that prefers to live otherwise, for instance, in cities such as "those Petersburgs, Parises, and Londons of yours."¹⁰² Although he expects the vast majority of people to have broadly similar needs and preferences, he is well aware that each individual is unique and should be allowed to live idiosyncratically. "Whose business is it?" he writes, "Who would interfere? Let each person live as he chooses."¹⁰³

⁹⁹ Scanlan, 2003: 163.

¹⁰⁰ Chernyshevsky, 1989: 378. In the Russian, Chernyshevsky uses the repetitious phrase "полная воля, вольная воля" for emphasis (Chernyshevsky, 1966: 411). This could also be rendered "complete freedom, free freedom" or "complete will, wilful will." Although *воля* often has connotations of "unrestrained, drunken bacchanalia" (Cherkasova, 2009: 34), in this context it evidently implies a superlative degree of what I have called *liberty*, that is, the absence of external constraints that would prevent one from doing what one wants; Chernyshevsky thereby signals that although his utopia is very well-ordered, it does not interfere with the fulfilment of individual desires. Dostoevsky uses the term *воля* in a different way in, e.g., *Winter Notes* (Dostoevsky, 1988(a): 51 (PSS 5: 81)), where it seems to refer to *caprice* (see pages 33-34, above).

¹⁰¹ Chernyshevsky, 1989: 391.

¹⁰² Chernyshevsky, 1989: 375.

¹⁰³ Chernyshevsky, 1989: 375.

It is worth noting that Chernyshevsky's ideal does not in fact depend on the homogeneity of human aspirations; rather, it depends on the vast majority of people being sensible enough to band together in order to establish whatever conditions are necessary for the maximization of their own wellbeing, *however* this wellbeing is defined for each individual. The visionary sketch he presents of the "Crystal Palace" utopia is presumably, in its details, intended only as a taste of what might be possible. However naive such a position may be—and it is hardly more naive, in these general outlines, than our modern liberal democracies—it is not, on the face of it, *illiberal*.

Furthermore, Dostoevsky does not seem to claim that it is. As Frank writes in his analysis of *Winter Notes*: "Dostoevsky, to do him justice, does not accuse the Socialist ideal of involving any compulsion. On the contrary, he explicitly recognizes that the Socialists desire an entirely voluntary acceptance of their goals."¹⁰⁴ Of course—and this is Scanlan's point—Dostoevsky thinks that this is somehow unrealistic, that the Crystal Palace will ultimately amount to a limitation of liberty, and that people will not willingly give up any of their liberties for the sake of such peace and prosperity: "The unspoken implication of Dostoevsky's analysis is that the socialist 'utopia' can only be sustained by force."¹⁰⁵ In fact, the implication is made explicit when in *Winter Notes* Dostoevsky points out that the socialists, confronted with recalcitrants like the Underground Man, can do nothing but spit and amend their slogan: "*liberté, égalité, fraternité—ou la mort*."¹⁰⁶

So Scanlan's contention that the citizens of Chernyshevsky's utopia are compelled to live in a certain way seems unjustified. Yes, Dostoevsky implies that utopian socialism must eventually resort to force and compulsion. But the libertarian interpretation needs to be able to explain this fact, and not simply restate it, for Dostoevsky's claim is by no means self-evident. Why would people be willing to give up their freedom for the sake of altruism, but not for their own benefit? Why, given Chernyshevsky's

¹⁰⁴ Frank, 1986: 245.

¹⁰⁵ Scanlan, 2003: 162.

¹⁰⁶ Dostoevsky, 1988(a): 52. This really was the motto of the Paris Commune for a time.

stated commitment to the preservation of individual liberties, should his utopia ultimately lead to the destruction of liberty?¹⁰⁷ Whatever it is about utopian socialism that Dostoevsky thinks will ultimately lead to the suppression of liberties must be buried somewhere below the surface. This is, presumably, precisely what he asks us to discover through reading works such as *Winter Notes* and *Notes from Underground*. The answer cannot be as simple as “Chernyshevsky is not liberal enough,” for, seemingly, Dostoevsky himself is far less liberal.

The second problem with Scanlan’s explanation concerns his claim that Dostoevsky’s citizens somehow retain their liberty because they freely give it up. This makes little sense: freely giving up one’s freedom is still giving up one’s freedom, especially if one cannot readily get it back again; perhaps one may become a slave voluntarily, but one is no less a slave for it. And as Scanlan himself remarks, the sacrifice of liberty Dostoevsky attributes to his ideal citizens is tantamount to “giving oneself into slavery.”¹⁰⁸ Indeed, Dostoevsky’s brotherhood demands a far greater sacrifice of liberty than the socialist utopia. Chernyshevsky is the one that wishes to establish the conditions needed for most, indeed all people to live in whatever way most satisfies their own needs and inclinations; Dostoevsky, by contrast, thinks that people should forget about their own needs and inclinations and dedicate themselves to the service of others. How, then, does he manage to avoid the argument of his own *Notes from Underground*? Scanlan explains less paradoxically that Dostoevsky’s citizens *don’t mind* giving up their freedom, whereas the socialists’ do—perhaps it is only in this sense that they are still free. Frank makes a somewhat similar point, and thinks that perhaps because they have internalized the Christian ethics of brotherhood, they feel no “inner conflict” when sacrificing their freedom for the community.¹⁰⁹ But here we are back

¹⁰⁷ To provide a Dostoevskian answer to this question we would, of course, have to forget what we know about totalitarian socialism in the twentieth century.

¹⁰⁸ Scanlan, 2003: 163. One might suppose that, unlike slaves, citizens of Dostoevsky’s utopia could chose to return to their former ways of life, and would therefore remain free; however, if the requisite attitude of altruism leads them to give away their time and property, as seems likely, this would presumably become difficult or impossible in practice.

¹⁰⁹ Frank, 1986: 245.

to where we started; once again, this difference is precisely what needs to be explained. Why don't they mind giving up their freedom? Why can't the socialist citizens internalize the ethics of utilitarian egoism which their utopia is founded on? Chernyshevsky would maintain that, surely, normal people are far less likely to mind giving up *some* of their liberty for their own prosperity, than giving up *all* of their liberty for sake of others.

5.2. Scanlan's Second Solution

So it seems like Scanlan's first attempt to rescue Dostoevsky's utopia from the Underground Man's attack does not succeed. Scanlan returns to the problem in his section on Dostoevsky's views about socialism, where he explicitly raises the question of how Dostoevsky's own social ideal can hang together with the Libertarian Argument against utopian socialism:

But in relentlessly showing the failure of the socialists' ideal—the impossibility of achieving it without unacceptable regimentation—is not Dostoevsky also casting doubt on the attainability of his own social ideal, which surely must be hostage to the same human egoism and rebelliousness that create a problem for the socialists?¹¹⁰

This question clearly poses a threat to the basic coherence of Dostoevsky's thought. Scanlan does not attempt to meet this challenge, however, and instead launches into a general discussion of the feasibility of Dostoevsky's ideal, focusing on the problem of the "law of personality," which Scanlan equates with egoism, and which Dostoevsky had once noted was "binding on earth."¹¹¹ The problem he discusses here concerns whether Dostoevsky's utopian ideal is implausible in light of some of Dostoevsky's more pessimistic statements about the inherent egoism of human nature. In response he argues that Dostoevsky came increasingly to believe that rebellious egoism

¹¹⁰ Scanlan, 2003: 189.

¹¹¹ In the famous notebook entry prompted by the death of his first wife (Dostoevsky, 1973: 39-40).

was not a universal and insurmountable phenomenon, and therefore not a threat to his utopian ideal.

We may leave aside the details of this discussion, because in any case, Scanlan's response undermines his own interpretation of Dostoevsky's argument against utopian socialism. If the only way to save Dostoevsky's social ideal is to admit that he didn't think the egoistic need for liberty was such a problem after all—that people like Underground Man would *not* necessarily spring up to destabilise the social harmony with their capriciousness—then the argument loses all its force. We are still faced with the problem that his argument against utopian socialism, on Frank and Scanlan's account, does not adequately discriminate between its intended target and Dostoevsky's own ideal. This problem presents itself as a dilemma: either Dostoevsky thinks that the need for liberty is a universal phenomenon, or he doesn't. In the first case, Dostoevsky's argument refutes socialism but also refutes his own ideal. In the second, Dostoevsky's ideal is saved from his argument against socialism, but so is the socialist ideal. Scanlan seems to stumble onto the first horn in his discussion of Dostoevsky's utopia, and the second in his section on socialism. In both cases, it seems to me, he fails to address the problem satisfactorily, and his interpretation of Dostoevsky's social philosophy dissolves into contradictions. I cannot see any way out of this dilemma, or indeed any way in which Dostoevsky could be said to coherently accept the Libertarian Argument against utopian socialism.

6. Conclusion

In this chapter I hope to have established the initial problem faced by the libertarian interpretation of *Notes from Underground*. According to this interpretation, Dostoevsky argues that utopian socialism will fail because it constricts individual liberties. Through disambiguating the notion of freedom, and clarifying the different kinds of freedom important to *Notes from Underground*, I have already suggested that this

interpretation is highly suspect: because Dostoevsky's own utopian ideal is far more *illiberal* than Chernyshevsky's, he cannot without contradicting himself complain that Chernyshevsky pays too little heed to the importance of liberty. This is not in itself an *incontrovertible* reason to reject the libertarian interpretation: after all, Dostoevsky's thought might just be inconsistent. It will thus be necessary to consider the *Notes* in detail to see whether the Libertarian Argument can be extracted from Dostoevsky's actual text; this will be addressed in Chapters 3 and 4, below.

What might Dostoevsky's argument against utopian socialism be, if it is not the Libertarian Argument? Dostoevsky evidently does believe that the phenomenon of caprice, in some shape or form, is a problem for utopian socialism, but not for his own Christian ideal. But why isn't Dostoevsky's ideal "hostage to the same human egoism and rebelliousness that create a problem for the socialists?"¹¹² The answer must be psychological, because it concerns the problematic psychological reaction which Dostoevsky thinks utopian socialism will provoke if it is wholeheartedly believed or implemented. I agree with Frank and Jackson that the character of the Underground Man himself—specifically, his capriciousness—is intended to illustrate the effects of believing in Chernyshevsky's Nihilist utopian socialism. The question then becomes, which aspect of Chernyshevsky's philosophy is responsible for causing the Underground Man to become capricious? Frank and Jackson claim that Chernyshevsky's *determinism* is responsible, since it convinces the Underground Man that he has no free will; I shall argue that this is not the case, and that in fact his philosophical *nihilism* more generally is to blame, in a manner to be investigated more fully in the following chapters. In any case, once we have grasped the genesis of the Underground Man's caprice, we shall see exactly how Dostoevsky implicates utopian socialist doctrines in the problem of caprice, and thereby understand his polemical method. To that end, I shall be guided in what follows by this crucial question: why is the Underground Man capricious? It will be easier to answer this question when we have examined, in

¹¹² Scanlan, 2003: 189.

Chapters 3 and 4, the shortcomings of the libertarian interpretation of Dostoevsky's polemic against Chernyshevsky.

Chapter 3: The Underground Psychology

1. Introduction

In the last chapter, I criticized interpretations of Dostoevsky's attack on Nihilist social philosophy that attribute to him what I called the Libertarian Argument, the view that utopian socialism is bound to fail because humans have a need for liberty which is incompatible with its deterministic ideology. In the following two chapters I will consider the two primary means by which such libertarian interpretations are justified. The second of these, to be considered in Chapter 4, concerns the Underground Man's polemical attack on utopian socialism. The first focuses on the psychology of the Underground Man himself, and also constitutes an attempt to explain his caprice directly.

As we have seen, this *caprice* is what, primarily, makes the Underground Man unfit for harmonious society: because of it, he is incapable of virtuous citizenship. Scholars have typically attributed the Underground Man's caprice to a need to affirm his personal freedom in the face of *determinism* and a concomitant sense of helpless, crushing inertia. According to Robert Louis Jackson, the Underground Man's "masochistic delight in suffering" is an "uncompromising subjective rebellion" against determinism.¹ On this view, Dostoevsky thus uses the Underground Man to flesh out "the basic and irreconcilable conflicts between human nature and all social or philosophical constructs that deny free will."² If this reading were correct, the social-philosophical implications of the *Notes* would be straightforward: social models which contradict the basic human need for freedom will provoke "uncompromising subjective rebellion" and thereby undermine their own stability. This is the kernel of the Libertarian

¹ Jackson, 1981: 162.

² Jackson, 1981: 160f.

Argument. As we have seen, however, this reading is unlikely to be correct as an interpretation of Dostoevsky's polemic, since it represents an attack on all societies that demand the curtailment of liberties, including Dostoevsky's own Christian ideal, which demands the sacrifice of all of one's goods, including one's liberties, for the sake of other people. From this fact alone it is evidently necessary to gain a clearer understanding of the psychological mechanisms which, Dostoevsky would have us believe, lead somehow from utopian socialism to caprice and thereby cast doubt on the possibility of constructing a stable society on the basis of that ideology.

2. Basic Features of Underground Psychology

As we are now moving to consider the personality of the Underground Man in detail, I shall begin with a brief outline of the psychological content of *Notes from Underground*, in order to establish the subject under consideration. All of this will be considered in greater detail in subsequent chapters, as it becomes relevant. *Notes from Underground* is the fictional narrative of a nameless former civil servant, and consists of two parts. The first is more consistently theoretical and sees the Underground Man describing and attempting to get to grips with various features of his own character, as well as with the psychological, social and ethical ideas of the Nihilists. The second, more "confessional" part recounts an extended episode from his past which follows from and illustrates the theoretical observations of Part I. Since Part I contains the most sustained analysis of the underground psychology, this is what I shall focus on below. I shall draw upon elements of Part II in later chapters, as and when they become relevant as illustrations.

In Chapter I of the *Notes*, the Underground Man opens with a description of himself in which one characteristic in particular comes to light, which the Underground Man

calls “malice” or “spite” (злость).³ This feeling or attitude leads him to approve of the fact that his liver hurts, and to refuse to see a doctor, for no apparent reason other than this spite itself. It also colours his discourse with offensive sarcasm and a cynical willingness to reveal his own failings; this paradoxically blends into proud standoffishness. We can already ascertain, therefore, that his spite contains elements of *capriciousness* and *masochism*—a flagrant disregard for common sense, and a willingness to suffer and be humiliated—which will become much more significant later on in his narrative. He begins:

I am a sick man. . . I am a spiteful man. I am an unattractive man. I think my liver is diseased. Then again, I don't know a thing about my illness; I'm not even sure what hurts. I'm not being treated and never have been, though I respect both medicine and doctors. [...] No, gentleman, it's out of spite that I don't wish to be treated. Now then, that's something you probably won't understand. Well, I do. Of course, I won't really be able to explain to you precisely who will be hurt by my spite in this case; I know perfectly well that I can't possibly “get even” with doctors by refusing their treatment; I know better than anyone that all this is going to hurt me alone, and no one else. Even so, if I refuse to be treated, it's out of spite. My liver hurts? Good, let it hurt even more!⁴

He then claims that when a civil servant he was cynically rude and domineering—also out of spite—and enjoyed wielding power over his petitioners—in particular, a “certain officer” who “refused to be humble,” but whom the Underground Man eventually cowed.⁵ Curiously, he then admits that he wasn't genuinely spiteful or embittered at all, that he was merely pretending, and that he was deeply ashamed of the fact. This is the second important characteristic introduced in this opening chapter, which he calls *inertia*, and which apparently prevents the Underground Man from really “being anything” at all, whether spiteful or magnanimous; that is, it prevents him from acquiring authentic character traits or ways of thinking and acting. He does

³ Dostoevsky, 2001: 3 (PSS 5: 99).

⁴ Dostoevsky, 2001: 3.

⁵ Dostoevsky, 2001: 4.

not attempt to explain this phenomenon immediately, but states that he “consoles” himself in the belief that his inertia is a consequence of his great intelligence, and states “that an intelligent man cannot seriously become anything and that only a fool can become something.”⁶ In the next chapter he continues on the theme of intelligence, and argues, in spite of the pride he takes in his own mental capabilities, that “consciousness is a disease.”⁷ He illustrates this point by raising the puzzle of why his own “overly acute” or “heightened consciousness” of the “sublime and beautiful”—his great love of intellectual and aesthetic high culture—led him into a self-contradictory lifestyle of petty vice and degradation which he himself found repulsive:

Tell me this: why was it, as if on purpose, at that very moment, indeed, at the precise moment that I was most capable of becoming conscious of the subtleties of everything that was “beautiful and sublime,” as we used to say at one time, that I didn’t become conscious, and instead did such unseemly things, things that. . . well, in short, probably everyone does, but it seemed as if they occurred to me deliberately at the precise moment when I was most conscious that they shouldn’t be done at all? The more conscious I was of what was good, of everything “beautiful and sublime,” the more deeply I sank into the morass, and the more capable I was of becoming entirely bogged down in it.⁸

He then reveals that also he took a kind of masochistic pleasure in degrading himself in this way, and that this pleasure derived from his inertia, his inability to change his ways, which he then attributes to his heightened consciousness as well:

Let me explain: the pleasure resulted precisely from the overly acute consciousness of one’s own humiliation; from the feeling that one had reached the limit; that it was disgusting, but couldn’t be otherwise; you had no other choice [...]. But the main thing and the final point is that all of this was taking place according to normal and fundamental laws of overly acute consciousness and of the inertia which results directly

⁶ Dostoevsky, 2001: 4.

⁷ Dostoevsky, 2001: 5.

⁸ Dostoevsky, 2001: 6.

from these laws; consequently, not only couldn't one change, one simply couldn't do anything at all.⁹

He then elaborates further on the nature of this inertia, and explains that, unlike the "man of action," the man of heightened consciousness (the overly intelligent "mouse") is unable to settle on any deliberate course of action—revenge, forgiveness, mending his ways—because he can find no good reason to do so, no "primary reason" on which to base his decisions. What he lacks, as Bruce Ward writes, is "an idea of life sufficiently clear and powerful to govern his consciousness and bring his contradictory impulses into some sort of order."¹⁰ When the Underground Man tries to analyse the pros and cons of any possible course, he becomes trapped in an infinite regress or circle of doubt and ratiocination, and ends up doing nothing.¹¹ "You see," he says, "the direct, legitimate, immediate result of consciousness is inertia, that is, the conscious sitting idly by with one's arms folded."¹² He also repeatedly mentions the "laws of nature," and appears to implicate them, alongside his heightened consciousness, in the formation of his inertia. In this connection, he provides the following example. Supposing he had been slapped in the face, he muses, and wanted to respond magnanimously, he would be unable to do so even if he happened (counterfactually) to be magnanimous:

After all, I probably wouldn't have been able to make use of that magnanimity: neither to forgive, as the offender, perhaps, had slapped me in accordance with the laws of nature, and there's no way to forgive the laws of nature; nor to forget, because even if there were any laws of nature, it's offensive none the less.¹³

The "laws of nature," whose own nature is here somewhat obscure, appear to undercut the possibility of laying blame, and contribute to the impossibility of the

⁹ Dostoevsky, 2001: 6f.

¹⁰ Ward, 1986: 40.

¹¹ Dostoevsky, 2001: 13.

¹² Dostoevsky, 2001: 12.

¹³ Dostoevsky, 2001: 7.

Underground Man being able to commit wholeheartedly to any course of action. Why the resulting inertia should lead to his (possibly factitious) feeling of spite, and his preference for masochism and caprice, is not immediately obvious, but the reason seems to pertain to the frustration of his need for freedom and self-expression: spite is a reaction to the impossibility of overcoming his inertia to express himself in a natural way. Thus heightened consciousness, inertia, and spiteful caprice are all bound together into a causal nexus whose precise character is in need of clarification, but which is the basis of what we can call the "underground psychology."

The Underground Man continues with these psychological reflections and, in Chapter VII, begins his famous critique of rational egoism and utopian socialism which continues until the end of Part I. It is in this part of the book that the notion of caprice comes to the fore, as what the Underground Man calls "the most advantageous advantage," or, in other words, that which is valued by humans above all else. As defined in the previous chapter, capricious activity is activity which is free from all external and internal constraints; it is the bare activity of will, unmotivated by anything other than the will itself. This is what the Underground Man believes will cause the downfall of utopian socialism, as, ultimately, the populace turns to chaos and destruction as a means of satisfying their need for it. Evidently, his own character is supposed to illustrate the psychological mechanisms responsible, in his view (and perhaps Dostoevsky's), for the inevitable failure of utopian socialism.

We are now acquainted with the basic characteristics of the underground psychology which we need to explain. "Spite" seems to be its most general quality, masochism and caprice its most typical manifestation. For present purposes this caprice is the most important of the Underground Man's character traits, since it is what makes him incapable of participating in harmonious society, and is thus the linchpin of Dostoevsky's psychological argument against utopian socialism. Inertia and heightened consciousness seem to be more fundamental, however, and to be intended as means for explaining this caprice.

3. The Libertarian Theory of the Underground Psychology

According to libertarians, the underground psychology is the result of free will being threatened. As stated, the threat usually identified is the idea of *determinism*, the theory that every event—from chemical reactions to the thoughts and activities of humans and animals—is predetermined by virtue of the fact that it belongs to the causal order of the universe. Determinism is incompatible with all kinds of freedom because it means that none of our activities can be otherwise than they are: there is no way in which we can meaningfully choose between alternative possibilities, because there are no such possibilities.¹⁴ According to Frank and Jackson, the Underground Man becomes capricious because, as a disciple of the Nihilists, he believes in determinism and perceives it as a threat to his free will. “It would be possible to show,” Frank writes,

how every self-contradictory response of the underground man in [the first six chapters] derives from this dialectic, which is driven by the contradiction between the underground man’s intellectual acceptance of Chernyshevsky’s determinism and his simultaneous rejection of it with the entire intuitive-emotional level of his personality identified with moral conscience.

The libertarian approach has enormous appeal as a means of explaining the Underground Man’s character because, as we have just seen, he is clearly obsessed with defending his “freedom” (the “most advantageous advantage”), and because this notion is clearly central to what seems to be the most important section of Part I, the attack on utopian socialism. Thus this kind of interpretation is usually assumed as a matter of course; as Gary Saul Morson writes: “The underground man’s rebellion against determinism and its consequences has become one of the most famous

¹⁴ Many philosophers—e.g. the Stoics, Hobbes, Hume—have argued for “compatibilist” positions which aim to reconcile free will with determinism in one way or another (see Kane, 2005: chapter 2). As we shall see, the Underground Man is plainly not a compatibilist—he acknowledges the incompatibility of free will and determinism—so we need not be concerned with the possibility of such a reconciliation here.

moments in modern thought, and with good reason.”¹⁵ The question is, however, whether it can withstand the disambiguation of the word “freedom” proposed in the last chapter, and the fact that, as I have argued, libertarians are not talking about the same kind of freedom as the Underground Man.

We must also ask whether this obsession may be taken at face value, or whether it must itself be explained with reference to a completely different set of psychological problems. Scholars have recognized that the reliability of the Underground Man’s assertions can always be doubted, but, it seems to me, have made something of an exception for his remarks on free will. Thus Frank, who is generally most careful in this regard, nevertheless takes the Underground Man’s attack on utopian socialism, conceived as an instance of the Libertarian Argument, to be a straightforward expression of Dostoevsky’s own views.¹⁶ Of course, Frank provides reasons for thinking this way; but this is also part of a general trend which, I think, stems from the widely accepted picture of Dostoevsky as a champion of freedom in the age of autocracy, and in the face of a new totalitarian threat wearing the mask of liberalism. I have already expressed doubts about this approach; on the other hand, I grant the intuitive appeal of the libertarian theory of the underground psychology and that, even if it is ultimately inadequate, it is the best place to start.

To proceed, I believe it is useful to divide the Part I of *Notes from Underground* into two main sections, already mentioned above: Chapters I-VI, which contain psychological and philosophical reflections pertaining to the Underground Man’s own condition and Nihilist ideology, and Chapters VII-X, which contain the Underground Man’s direct critique of Nihilist utopian socialism. According to Frank, the Underground Man’s attack on utopian socialism is simply a generalization based on the description of his own psychology in the preceding chapters.¹⁷ In Chapters I-VI, on this reading, we see how the Underground Man himself became diseased as a result

¹⁵ Morson, 1994: 28.

¹⁶ Frank, 1986: 323.

¹⁷ Frank, 1986: 338.

of his assimilation of the radical ideology; in Chapters VII-X, we see how everyone would suffer the same fate if this ideology was propagated and realized in the socialist utopia.

As stated in the introduction to this chapter, there are thus two ways we can approach the problem of understanding the Underground Man's caprice: we can investigate the way in which the Underground Man explains his own caprice in terms of his own ideas, his heightened consciousness and his inertia; and we can investigate the way in which he uses the psychology of caprice to argue against utopian socialism. With respect to the first group of chapters, I shall argue that his heightened consciousness and inertia—the psychological basis of his whole condition—do not derive from any belief in determinism; with respect to the second group, that the utopian socialism he attacks is not fundamentally deterministic, and that he does not maintain that caprice will result from the threat it poses to liberty. In both cases, then, I contend that the libertarian interpretation does not correctly identify the psychological source of caprice, and is thus mistaken in deriving the Libertarian Argument from *Notes from Underground*.

4. Inertia

In the remainder of this chapter, I shall examine the libertarian attempt to explain the Underground Man's caprice by means of the psychological reflections in Chapters I-VI of Part I, in which the Underground Man blames it on his "inertia," his inability to make decisive changes to his behaviour or character. As we have seen, this is one of the two ways in which libertarian readers have attempted to derive the Libertarian Argument from *Notes from Underground*. Advocating the simplest form of this approach, Joseph Frank has argued that this inertia is a direct result of believing in determinism and attempting to live according to its practical implications; it then follows that caprice is ultimately a consequence of this belief as well. Jackson is less

explicit about the role of inertia in the Underground Man's psychology, but the explanation proposed by Frank is clearly analogous to his comparison of the Underground Man to the convicts in *The House of the Dead*. The psychological mechanism seen to be at work here is fairly straightforward: belief in determinism robs the Underground Man of the means to make decisions and to act naturally; this causes him to cease acting almost entirely, that is, to become inert; this unnatural state of inertia in turn provokes an extreme restlessness that manifests in caprice. I shall investigate this theory to see whether the Underground Man's inertia really does derive from his belief in determinism, and, therefore, whether belief in determinism can be held responsible for his caprice.

The fact that the Underground Man appears to blame the "laws of nature" for his loss of authentic activity has often quite naturally been taken as a direct reference to determinism; this is the starting point for libertarian interpretations. Frank has also drawn attention to the fact that heightened consciousness, which the Underground Man states causes him to become "inert" in the first place, obeys strict "laws" of its own; he sees this as an indication that the Underground Man's affliction results from his assimilation of deterministic science and philosophy. As the Underground Man says of his psychological development, "all of this was taking place according to normal and fundamental laws of overly acute consciousness and of the inertia which results directly from these laws."¹⁸ As stated, Frank simply *identifies* this heightened consciousness with the acceptance of deterministic philosophy, and recognition of the impossibility of freedom and moral responsibility which follows from it.¹⁹ He writes:

[T]he pseudo-scientific terms of the underground man's declaration about "hyperconsciousness" are a parody of Chernyshevsky's assertion, in *The Anthropological Principle in Philosophy*, that no such thing as free will exists or can exist, since whatever actions man attributes to his own initiative are really a result of the "laws of nature." The

¹⁸ Dostoevsky, 2001: 6f.

¹⁹ Leatherbarrow has a similar view of heightened consciousness, which he takes to be a kind of philosophical attitude responsible for "discovering" "immutable and inescapable scientific laws" (Leatherbarrow, 2005: 48).

underground man reveals the effects on his character of the “hyperconsciousness” derived from a knowledge of such “laws,” and thus mockingly exemplifies what such a doctrine really means in practice. Such “hyperconsciousness,” based on the conviction that free will is an illusion, leads to a bewildered demoralisation [...].²⁰

Frank then explains the Underground Man’s *inertia*, his “bewildered demoralisation,” as a consequence of this acceptance, which carries with it the elimination of all moral notions. Without recourse to moral ideas like blame and justice—meaningless in a universe without free will or moral responsibility—the Underground Man has no means of legitimating his moral emotions (his feelings of guilt, offence, indignation, and so on). He is therefore forced to keep them in abeyance, though he cannot eliminate them from his heart, and denies himself the possibility of acting and satisfying his moral-emotional needs. For Frank, then, the Underground Man’s inertia is simply the psychological consequence of his attempting to apply Chernyshevsky’s determinism to real life.

This dehumanizing state of inertia, Frank supposes, then erupts into masochistic caprice because it is only through rebelling violently against the stifling edicts of his intellect—which has assimilated the idea of determinism—that he can hope to vent the frustration of his moral-emotional needs:

Why does he refuse to see a doctor about his liver or insist that one may enjoy moaning needlessly and pointlessly about a toothache? It is because, in both instances, some mysterious, impersonal power—the laws of nature—has reduced the individual to complete helplessness [i.e. inertia]; and his only method of expressing a *human* reaction to this power is to refuse to submit silently to its despotism, to protest against its despotism no matter in how ridiculous a fashion.²¹

²⁰ Frank, 1986: 319.

²¹ Frank, 1986: 320.

It is in this way that libertarians can explain the Underground Man's inertia in terms of the idea of determinism, and his caprice in terms of his inertia, and thus, ultimately, as a consequence of determinism as well.

Liza Knapp has taken this approach to understanding the Underground Man's inertia further than any other scholar, and, though Dostoevsky's argument against utopian socialism is not her main concern, it is worth mentioning her views briefly as an illustration of the extent to which it is possible to read *Notes from Underground* as a battlefield between freedom and determinism. Furthermore, whilst she arrives at an explanation congruent with Frank's, she begins from a very different starting point, which goes to show that one need not approach the work with a specific set of assumptions in order to read it this way. Whereas Frank begins with trying to understand Dostoevsky's engagement with contemporary utopian socialism, Knapp starts from the idea that all of his works can be seen as engaging with the idea of death and the possibility of defeating it.²² Drawing on the notebook entry Dostoevsky wrote upon the death of his first wife, she equates death with inertia, which she understands literally as a reference to Newton's first law of motion. When Christ was resurrected he opened up the possibility of defying Newtonian mechanics, and defeating death and inertia, which are characteristic of postlapsarian humanity.²³ "And when [Dostoevsky] equates man's fallen state with inertia," she writes, "he does not create a metaphor, but rather carries certain patristic concepts to their conclusion: sinning man loses his divine attributes and becomes nothing more than physical matter, subject to physical laws, primary among them inertia."²⁴ Her interpretation of the *Notes* follows this pattern, and the Underground Man's repeated mentions of "the laws of nature" and "inertia" play easily into her schema. Thus Knapp views the Underground Man's inertia—his inability to act or become anything decisively—as a consequence of his subjugation to Newtonian mechanics. Both the Underground Man and the "man of

²² Knapp, 1996: 1.

²³ Knapp, 1996: 13.

²⁴ Knapp, 1996: 14.

action," she states, are "ultimately materialists, who bow to scientific law."²⁵ She seems to mean that they wrongly think Newtonian mechanics either applies to the human psyche, or can be used as a guide in human affairs, or both. As I understand her, they think themselves to be nothing but objects in a mechanistic universe, and behave accordingly. The man of action can still *act*, but only in the sense that he can *be moved*, like any other inanimate object. Both are inert in the manner of Newtonian masses—their velocities can only be modified by forces acting from without, in accordance with fixed laws. Whether "at rest," like the Underground Man, or "in motion," like the man of action, all people in the fallen state are heteronomous agents.²⁶ As Knapp says:

In *Notes from the Underground*, both the underground man and the men of action have lost the capacity for freely willed, self-generated, and self-directed motion. They have no vital force. This, Dostoevsky shows, is what happens when the Newtonian covenant replaces all other covenants.²⁷

In the case of the Underground Man, who self-*consciously* gives himself over to inertia, this "Newtonian covenant" manifests itself in the "laws of hyper-developed consciousness" which "are at least as tyrannical as, and, as the underground man's confession reveals, a form of, the laws of nature."²⁸ So for Knapp, as for Frank, the Underground Man's inertia proceeds from *determinism*, and is evidence in favour of the libertarian approach.

There is certainly support for this kind of reading in the text, but, as we shall see, it is contradicted by other material. Indeed, it seems to me that there is an incongruity in the Underground Man's explanation of his own inertia: on the one hand, as

²⁵ Knapp, 1996: 24.

²⁶ Bruce Ward would seem to endorse a similarly anti-Newtonian interpretation of Dostoevsky's ideal of freedom, which he calls "freedom from subjection to material necessity" —for Ward, this is to be attained by self-mastery, through which we can "achieve an image of that complete overcoming of material necessity which is true freedom" (Ward, 1984: 158).

²⁷ Knapp, 1996: 24.

²⁸ Knapp, 1996: 24.

emphasized by Frank and other libertarians, he blames it on what he calls the “laws of nature,” which is usually seen as a reference to determinism; on the other hand, he blames it on a tendency to deliberate excessively and overanalyse his motivations, a kind of sceptical reasoning which has been labelled “Hamletism” (in reference both to Shakespeare’s original and to his descendants in such Russian works as Turgenev’s “Hamlet of Shchigrovsky District,” which illustrate the same traits).²⁹ It seems to me that the libertarian reading fails to take this second mode of explanation, and the incongruity between the two modes, seriously enough. To understand the Underground Man’s inertia, it will be necessary to resolve this incongruity in some way, and come to a unified and consistent explanation. To that end, I shall firstly address the second mode of explanation adopted by the Underground Man, which appeals to his Hamletism, and which I take to be his clearest description of heightened consciousness and the way in which it leads to inertia. I then proceed to address the first mode, which appeals to the laws of nature, and which libertarians draw upon in support of their interpretation. I provide an alternative reading of the “laws of nature” which does not invoke the notion of determinism. Ultimately, I attempt to assimilate the first mode to the second, and argue that in general the Underground Man’s inertia is a direct result of unbridled sceptical reasoning or Hamletism.

5. Hamletism

Whilst the Underground Man does seem to associate his inertia with the notion of determinism, as stated, he attributes it more straightforwardly to his Hamlet-like tendency to procrastinate and overanalyse his actions, a quirk which does not seem to have any basis in the idea of determinism; indeed, the fact that he so earnestly deliberates about possible courses of action suggests that he believes his behaviour is free and not predetermined. Frank recognizes that the Underground Man belongs to the

²⁹ I shall return to the theme of “Hamletism” in Russian literature in Chapter 9, below.

Hamlet type, but does not think this identification has much explanatory potential; he appears to prefer a libertarian reading for the reason that it makes more sense in the context of Dostoevsky's polemical engagement with utopian socialism.³⁰ It seems to be at least partly in service to his theory of this polemic that Frank displaces the idea of Hamletism with that of determinism; he relegates the former to a mere "thematic resemblance"—Dostoevsky's allusion to the tradition of Hamlets and other "superfluous men" in Russian literature, of literary but not philosophical interest.³¹ Of course, such considerations should play an important role in our interpretation of *Notes from Underground*, but, since at this stage in our investigation the polemical intent of the novel remains almost entirely problematic, I prefer to allow a more direct reading of the text to guide us at first.

To begin with, we may note that when the Underground Man proceeds to actually explain *why* heightened consciousness inevitably leads to inaction, he makes no mention of determinism. Instead, he describes inertia as a consequence of the nature of reason, thought, intellect, or "consciousness" itself. In fact, his way of thinking exemplifies a traditional cornerstone of sceptical philosophy, the regress problem, which starts from the simple idea that our beliefs need to be justified: for any claim we make, we ought to be able to respond sensibly to a request for justification; but every other claim we make in order to justify it needs justification as well; and so on to infinity. Because of this infinite regress, it is impossible to reach a secure foundation—or as the Underground Man calls it, a "first principle" or "primary reason" (первоначальная причина)—that would provide justification for any belief, or, by extension, any course of action which one might undertake on the basis of that belief. As Malcolm Jones has noted, the Underground Man grapples not only with practical deliberations but with the more fundamental problem of "the impossibility of finding any stable basis at all for philosophical certainty."³² This is ultimately why the Underground Man thinks that no course of action can ever be adequately justified, and

³⁰ Frank, 1986: 318f.

³¹ Frank, 1986: 319.

³² Jones, 2009: 160.

commends himself to “sitting idly by with one’s arms folded.” This kind of sceptical reasoning is described most fully in the following passage:

For, in order to begin to act, one must first be absolutely at ease, with no lingering doubts whatsoever. Well, how can I, for example, ever feel at ease? Where are the primary reasons I can rely upon, where’s the foundation? Where shall I find it? I exercise myself in thinking, and consequently, with me every primary reason drags in another, an even more primary one, and so on to infinity. This is precisely the essence of all consciousness and thought. And here again, it must be the laws of nature.³³

The fact that “первоначальная причина” is so often translated as “primary cause” demonstrates how entrenched the libertarian reading is: the English denotes an initial event at the beginning of a deterministic causal sequence.³⁴ From the context, however, it is clear that the Underground Man is referring to *reasons for action* (another common meaning of “причина”), motivating factors which would take precedence over the other conflicting considerations which trap him in a state of deliberation, and would impel him to overcome his doubts and take decisive action.

We may observe that the laws of nature are mentioned again here, but there is no reason to think that the idea of determinism is in play; the Underground Man is engaged in a completely free process of reasoning. Indeed, *freedom* seems to be the problem: he has too much free time on his hands, and allows his mind to range too freely from practical matters. In this respect, he contrasts himself with the worldly “man of action.” The spontaneous man of action doesn’t ask “Where are the primary reasons I can rely upon, where’s the foundation?” because he doesn’t stop to realise that an infinite regress is inevitable; he is thereby able to think, choose and act as if he had found a properly justified foundation for his choice. He is not plagued by doubts because he doesn’t pause to question his own motives, to demand justification of

³³ Dostoevsky, 2001: 13 (*PSS* 5: 118). Translation altered.

³⁴ This choice of words is also found in the translations of, e.g., Kentish, Garnett, Pevear and Volokhonsky, Wilks, Jakim, and Zinovieff and Hughes (Dostoevsky, 1991, 1992, 1993, 2009(a), 2009(b), 2014).

himself; ordinary, everyday motives are enough for his practical and pragmatic approach to life. For the Underground Man, this can only be the result of stupidity or dishonesty. He gives the example of wanting to take revenge for some offence. The man of action might convince himself he has a basis for taking action with reference to a moral idea like justice. "That means, he's found a primary reason, a foundation: namely, justice." But *he* doesn't see any justice or virtue in the act. According to Frank, this is because he has assimilated the deterministic philosophy of the Nihilists, according to which there are in general no such moral principles: "The underground man *agrees* with [his interlocutor's] theory that all human conduct is nothing but a mechanical product of the laws of nature"; he therefore thinks that justice, a moral idea dependent on the possibility of free will and moral responsibility, cannot exist.³⁵ There is little evidence for this in the text, however: the Underground Man refers plainly to the fact that people who act according to moral ideas like justice do so because they "mistake immediate and secondary reasons for primary ones, and thus they are convinced more quickly and easily than other people that they've located an indisputable basis for action."³⁶ Whether or not he believes in the possibility of justice as an abstract principle, the Underground Man cannot possibly use it to sanction his actions, because in every case he seeks an unquestionable, "indisputable basis for action" that can never be found. He will always lapse into a sceptical regress of doubts and questions, and so inertia. The description he provides clearly exemplifies the stalling role played by doubt and ratiocination:

Finally, we come to the act itself, to the very act of revenge. In addition to its original nastiness, the mouse [i.e. the intelligent man] has already managed to pile up all sorts of other nastiness around itself in the form of hesitations and doubts; so many unresolved questions have emerged from that one single question, that some kind of fatal brew is concocted unwillingly, some kind of stinking mess consisting of doubts, anxieties, and, finally, spittle showered upon it by the spontaneous men of action

³⁵ Frank, 1986: 320f.

³⁶ Dostoevsky, 2001: 13.

who stand by solemnly as judges and arbiters, roaring with laughter
until their sides split.³⁷

Further to this, we are given a concrete illustration of how his inertia develops, when the Underground Man recalls the embarrassing encounter he had with an officer and then his quest to take revenge.³⁸ At no stage in this narrative does the Underground Man appear to be hindered by a belief in determinism or anything similar. On the contrary, we are provided with an illustration of the behaviour of a “mouse,” exactly as described above, agonizing, doubting and vacillating for years at a stretch, searching for “primary reasons,” but doing very little, and only managing to take revenge at last through a kind of accident—for no *reason* at all—and in the most petty and ridiculous way possible.³⁹

Thus we can see that in practice his inertia is not the result of any particular scientific or philosophical doctrine, such as the mechanistic determinism of Newtonian mechanics or contemporary Russian Nihilism; he does not state or imply anything along the lines of “Determinism is true according to science, therefore there is no free will, or morality, so we must be inert.” Nor does any such reasoning appear to influence him on a subconscious level, as it might if he were in thrall to Knapp’s “Newtonian covenant.” On the contrary, as he says, his inertia comes about in the same way as the original Hamlet’s, through “hesitations, doubts and unresolved questions.” He has arrived at his theoretical endorsement of inertia *a priori*, through a sceptical demand for justification—for “primary reasons”—which he explicitly calls the “essence of all consciousness and thought.” This makes little sense as a reference to determinism. I therefore believe Scanlan is on the right track when he defines the Underground Man’s heightened consciousness quite simply as “perpetual reflection on his own reactions, motives, and behaviour” (this definition is more properly a description of the *consequences* of heightened consciousness, which I prefer to think of as nothing more

³⁷ Dostoevsky, 2001: 8f. (PSS 5: 104). Writing “brew” instead of “blow,” which I assume is a typographical mistake (translating *бypдa*, which literally means “dishwater”).

³⁸ Dostoevsky, 2001: 34-39.

³⁹ Dostoevsky, 2001: 34-39.

than self-reflective intelligence, with a strong aesthetic inclination—as in “heightened conscious of the sublime and beautiful”).⁴⁰ Interestingly, although in general he shares the libertarian approach, Scanlan’s understanding of heightened consciousness is diametrically opposed to Frank’s: whereas Frank ties it to the doctrine of determinism, which denies free will, Scanlan thinks it enables the Underground Man to realise introspectively that he is a free agent.⁴¹ This comes closer, as he notes, to Existentialist interpretations which take the Underground Man to be oppressed and crippled, not by real or imagined constraints, but by a radical surfeit of freedom. It is precisely this indeterminacy of his will, deriving from the perceived impossibility of establishing unshakable grounds for action, which leads him, like Hamlet, to refrain from acting.⁴²

* * *

We have now considered one of the two ways in which the Underground Man explains his inertia. In this case, Hamlet-like sceptical reasoning, rather than any belief in determinism, seems to be responsible. The libertarian reading is thus unable to account for this mode of explanation. However, it is still necessary to make sense of the Underground Man’s second mode of explanation. In addition to the sceptical reasoning described above, he blames his inertia on the “laws of nature”—this is the evidence used by Frank and other libertarians to support their contention that the Underground Man is referring to determinism. According to Frank, as we have seen, the Underground Man’s inertia is the result of the elimination of moral notions by natural

⁴⁰ Scanlan, 2002: 69. According to Donna Orwin, Dostoevsky investigated the psychological dangers of excess self-consciousness “more thoroughly than any previous writers” (Orwin, 2007: 9).

⁴¹ Scanlan, 2002: 69.

⁴² Note that Scanlan understands Hamletism not as a sceptical reasoning, as I do, but as existential meditation on the very idea of human identity—without a stable identity, the Underground Man cannot know what his true interests are, so he becomes inert (Scanlan, 2002: 69). This seems wrong to me, since he *does* know what his interests are: going to see the doctor about his liver condition, for instance. He knows this is the right thing to do, but refrains out of “spite.” I shall return to this topic in Chapter 6.

science. Frank explains this “demoralization” by means of determinism: the deterministic laws of nature make free will impossible, and thereby undermine the possibility of moral responsibility. I shall therefore consider this line of thinking next.

6. The Laws of Nature

At one point, as we have seen, the Underground Man plainly attributes his inertia to the fact that, due to the laws of nature, no one can justly be *blamed* for anything. He gives the example of being slapped: “the offender, perhaps, had slapped me in accordance with the laws of nature,” and could therefore not be held accountable.⁴³ It is indeed natural to take this as a reference to determinism. According to Frank this goes to show that the Underground Man “knows only too well that the stone wall of science and determinism cuts the ground away from *any* type of moral reaction.”⁴⁴

Again, however, I believe an alternative reading of the text is to be preferred. Later, the Underground Man gives two concrete examples of what he calls “laws of nature,” deriving from “natural science and mathematics,” which appear to undermine Frank’s interpretation: the first, that we are “descended from monkeys,” and the second, that “in truth one drop of your own fat is dearer to you than the lives of one hundred thousand of your fellow creatures.”⁴⁵ Today we would hardly consider the latter to be a proposition of “natural science” at all, but it is necessary to remember that the field had a different purview in the past, and that “the laws of nature” did not always refer to the fundamental laws of physics and chemistry, as it typically does now. For the Underground Man, in this instance moral notions are threatened not by the deterministic implications of Newtonian mechanics, but by Darwinism and crude egoistic utilitarianism, which threaten to replace traditional notions of virtue with

⁴³ Dostoevsky, 2001: 7.

⁴⁴ Frank, 1986: 321.

⁴⁵ Dostoevsky, 2001: 10.

more “scientific” ideals of competition and enlightened self-interest. The “laws of nature” are thus not only scientific descriptions of the way the world works, but ethical *prescriptions* supposedly derived from the findings of natural science. So, from this perspective, the Underground Man would not be able to blame someone who slapped him “in accordance with the laws of nature” because that would mean, perhaps, that they had slapped him in pursuit of their own utility or advantage; the slap would then be entirely reasonable and just, and he would not be right to find fault with it. To act in accordance with such “laws,” as the offender did, is therefore not to act without moral responsibility, as Frank thinks, but to act *with* it. In that case it would be impossible to blame them because they have not acted in a reprehensible way: their action is justified by the moral implications of such (supposedly) scientific assertion as “one drop of your own fat is dearer to you than the lives of one hundred thousand of your fellow creatures.”

The example of the justified slap is a poor caricature of the kind of ethics that the Nihilists actually hoped to draw from the “laws of nature,” intended as a *reductio ad absurdum*. More charitably, we may say on their behalf that to act in accordance with the laws of nature is to arrange one’s life in such a way as to benefit from advancements in science and technology. Analogously, farmers abide by the laws of material and vegetable nature when they use the best equipment, plant and harvest at the right times, and so on. It is simply a matter of acting in accordance with prescriptions derived from the empirical investigation of natural phenomena. The Nihilists argued that this approach, which had made such good progress in the fields of industry and agriculture, should also be taken with respect to people themselves. Human beings, like plants, were seen to be natural organisms with certain natural requirements, which could be discovered and understood by means of sciences like physiology, psychology and—on a grander scale—political economy. Once it was understood how best to meet these requirements, life could be made to provide the greatest possible satisfaction of our needs. Thus the “laws of nature” attacked by the Underground Man are the rules one must follow if one wishes to flourish as a human being,

through fulfilling the requirements of one's human nature. The egoistic utilitarian ethics which may justify a slap in the face, and the social Darwinism by which Raskolnikov attempts to rationalize the fate of a vulnerable young woman in *Crime and Punishment*,⁴⁶ are the human equivalent of rules for producing the highest yield of crops on a farm.

Now, because the hyperconscious Underground Man never acts without pausing to question the rational foundations of his intentions, he is bound to take this into account, and to realise that he has no clear right to blame the offender, or, as such, either to forgive or to take revenge. I would further add that it is not necessary to think, with Frank, that the Underground Man *accepts* the Nihilistic implications of the "laws of nature" which he attributes to his interlocutors. On the contrary, to his sceptical, Hamlet-like intellect, the mere possibility of their truth is enough to cast doubt on his proposed course of revenge; and this *doubt* is all it takes to undermine the possibility of his acting with the unassailable justification he demands. Frank is right, as such, that the Underground Man's inertia is in this case caused by the elimination of moral notions, which carries with it the impossibility of satisfying his moral-emotional needs. It seems to me that he is wrong, however, to think that the idea of determinism is responsible for eliminating these notions in the Underground Man's mind. The psychological significance of the laws of nature, rather, consists in the way in which "natural science" threatens to undermine traditionally unquestionable moral values, and thereby fans the flames of the Underground Man's sceptical intellect; this prevents him from being able to utilize traditional moral notions as justification for desired courses of action.⁴⁷

Here we can explain the incongruity which at first seemed to mar the Underground Man's descriptions of inertia, concerning Hamletism on the one hand, and the "laws of nature" on the other. At bottom, the second mode of explanation resolves neatly into the first: it turns out that the "laws of nature" simply contribute to one of the

⁴⁶ Dostoevsky, 2003(b): 57-63.

⁴⁷ I shall consider the historical context of this phenomenon in Chapters 8 and 9.

ways—perhaps the most important way—in which his sceptical reasoning undermines his activity. This is because one of the most important means by which actions may be justified is morality; if the assumptions upon which one’s morals are based are questioned by natural science, then this whole source of justification becomes subject to doubt, and so fails to meet the Underground Man’s strict epistemic requirements. Thus the “laws of nature,” referring precisely to the findings of science which call traditional morality into question through purportedly sanctioning new moral codes, are responsible for undermining a significant source of justification for action.⁴⁸

* * *

There is one extremely puzzling passage which deserves special consideration in this context. Immediately after describing the way in which heightened consciousness makes it impossible to locate “primary reasons,” the Underground Man makes the following statement, regarding the attribution of blame:

You look—and the object vanishes, arguments evaporate, a guilty party can’t be identified, *the offense ceases to be one and becomes a matter of fate* [φαρυγγι], something like a toothache for which no one’s to blame [...]. So you throw up your hands because you haven’t found a primary reason.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ One may indeed note that, even though they undermine traditional morality, these findings do, by the very same token, introduce new sources of morality—why can’t the Underground Man use these new sources to justify his actions? In fact, though this is not made explicit in the text, we may deduce that he cannot do so for two reasons. Firstly, he is old-fashioned; he doesn’t have any *desire* to behave in accordance with utilitarianism or social Darwinism, because he cares about traditional virtues (this is clear from the sarcastic tone in which he enumerates the “laws of nature” which underwrite these newer moralities (Dostoevsky, 2001: 10)). So even if certain courses of action could be justified on this basis, he would not want to take them, and would remain inert. Secondly, and more importantly, the Underground Man demands absolute certainty in his “primary reasons” for action (Dostoevsky, 2001: 13); the fact that ethical systems can in general be undermined and superseded, when in the past they have been thought unquestionable, is surely enough to discredit them in his eyes. The destruction of traditional sources of moral justification is thus, for the Underground Man, a fatal blow to the possibility of such justification.

⁴⁹ Dostoevsky, 2001: 13 (PSS 5: 108). Italics added.

How should this be understood, coming as it does immediately after the description of sceptical reasoning which seems most clearly to support the Hamlet reading? The Underground Man here states that the legitimacy of blame is undermined because human actions are subsumed into the normal causal order of the world, which consists of toothaches and other “matters of fate.” This passage, above all others, seems to suggest that the Underground Man believes in determinism, and thereby lends credence to the libertarian interpretation. Even here, however, it is possible to offer an alternative reading.

In the first place, we should recognize that *fatalism* is not equivalent to *determinism*—to regard something as a matter of fate, one need not regard it as determined by the causal order of the universe, for one might also think of it as being, for instance, the will of a deity, or as something whose origin is simply mysterious. Loosely speaking, one can think of things like toothaches as being “matters of fate” in the sense that nobody knows why they occur—they simply exist. This is often, I think, what people mean when they say of an apparently inexplicable occurrence that “it must be fate” or that it is a “twist of fate.” Understood this way, what the Underground Man is saying is that, thanks to his sceptical deliberations—which, prior to this quote, he has just been discussing—the actions of human beings cease to make sense to him. He no longer understands why people do the things they do, just as he doesn’t understand why toothaches occur; “no one’s to blame” because the possibility of attributing causal efficacy to any object or person with certainty requires understanding *how* and *why* it has given rise to its supposed effects.⁵⁰ This is what the sceptically befuddled Underground Man cannot do. As such, this kind of “fatalism” is in fact the very opposite of believing in determinism, and is again a simple consequence of “Hamletism.”

Even if we suppose that this reading is incorrect, and grant that the Underground Man’s “matter of fate” is a reference to determinism, it is still possible to understand

⁵⁰ Note that scepticism about the notion of causation was one of the most important contributions of David Hume to the history of philosophy which I shall consider in Chapter 8. See *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, §VII (Hume, 1993: 39ff.).

the above passage in a way that does not support the libertarian reading. Note that the Underground Man states not that a commitment to fatalism forces him to change his evaluation of the world, but, on the contrary, that his heightened consciousness—which leads him to re-evaluate the moral status of the human domain—causes him to perceive the world as fatalistic. Thus his statement, even if fatalism is determinism here, does not support the idea that determinism has a psychologically causal significance for the Underground Man. The offence “becoming a matter of fate” is a consequence, and not a cause, of the sceptical reasoning which leads the Underground Man to “throw up his hands” and become inert. How might this come about? The Underground Man is describing a view of the world for which there is no significant difference between human activities and other physical events. We have seen that sceptical reasoning can strip away all moral attributes from human existence, in the manner described above, and thus reduce human actions to the *moral status* of “toothaches,” and moreover that it can do so without supposing in advance that there is no free will. To the sceptical Underground Man, there is no difference between a toothache and a slap in the face simply because neither provides legitimate grounds for a moral-emotional response. From this it is only a short step to the conviction that the human will—conceived as progenitor of moral responsibility—has no real place in the world, and that human actions are, to all intents and purposes, only the meaningless products of a blind fate.

Moreover, and more importantly, we may note even if he does on occasion find himself lapsing into a kind of despairing fatalism, or even full-blown determinism, the Underground Man continues throughout to act as if free will exists: this is obvious from the way in which he deliberates between different courses of action, and searches for “primary reasons” which could help him decide—as he says again in the quote above. As such, his adoption of a fatalist attitude, whatever its origin, does not in any case contribute significantly to his psychological economy; he evidently does not, as Frank maintains, take it to heart and attempt to live in accordance with its practical implications, and he does not in general become inert because of it. Whether

or not the quoted passage counts as evidence for belief in determinism, therefore, it does not support the libertarian theory of the psychological significance of such beliefs.

So, whilst I do not think there is good textual support for the supposition that the Underground Man's inertia is caused by belief in deterministic laws of nature, I do not wish to deny that some notion of determinism may belong among his beliefs, and may even contribute to the repression of his moral-emotional responses and so his inertia. I only doubt that determinism has the fundamental psychological importance attributed to it by scholars like Frank, Jackson and Knapp. Frank's straightforward identification of heightened consciousness with belief in determinism seems especially dubious. Whether or not one is ultimately convinced by my reinterpretation of the evidence used to justify the libertarian reading, however, should not be the sole deciding factor here. Ultimately—and this is by no means a remote possibility—the Underground Man may simply be confused. What I believe to be the most important consideration, therefore, is that libertarianism is inconsistent with the way in which we see the Underground Man's inertia illustrated in practice. Rather than being prompted by recognition of the consequences of determinism, his inertia is precipitated, as we have seen, by interminable deliberation characterized by doubts, hesitations and vacillations—as stated above, he could not behave in this way unless he believed he had the power to choose between the various possibilities subject to his deliberation. This implies either that he does not believe his thoughts and actions are predetermined, or that does not allow this belief to influence his life in the manner suggested by Frank and others. His main problem is that he can never find an absolutely convincing reason to choose one option over another; this, I have argued, is the basis of his inertia. If he does in addition subscribe inconsistently to determinism, the most it can do is function as an adjunct to this process of sceptical reasoning, or as another way in which the doctrines of nihilism add fuel to the furnace of doubt which consumes his plans and ambitions.

There is one final reason to think that the idea of determinism is not the cause of the Underground Man's inertia, and, more directly, that it is not responsible for his spiteful caprice either. After his initial reflections in Chapters I-VI, the Underground Man refers again to inertia only towards the end of Part I, where he argues that humans would never accept the historical finality of the utopian socialist ideal. He contends that humans, unlike ants, are not content with predictable monotony and stability, however pleasant it may be. As such, they would inevitably revolt against the "anthill" of the Crystal Palace. If such a utopia was somehow established, however, and—he grants for the sake of argument—it was also somehow impossible to rebel against its absolute finality, he thinks that the end result would be something like the inertia he previously attributed to himself. He writes:

Of course, after two times two [i.e. the rationalistic finality of the Crystal Palace], there's nothing left, not merely nothing to do, but nothing to learn. Then the only thing possible will be to plug up your five senses and plunge into contemplation. Well, even if you reach the same result with consciousness [that is, in the manner of the Underground Man himself], [...] at least you'll be able to flog yourself from time to time, and that will liven things up a bit. Although it may be reactionary, it's still better than nothing.⁵¹

Here, then, the determinism implied by the (*ex hypothesi*) absolute finality of the Crystal Palace is blamed for a kind of inertia, substantially but not genetically similar to the "conscious" inertia afflicting the Underground Man. This proves that *his* inertia—which we are trying to explain—does not originate in this way; his inertia derives from heightened consciousness, conceived most naturally as involving endless reflection and scepticism, rather than from determinism. Moreover, his inertia is crucially distinguished from the inertia caused by the Crystal Palace by its leaving open the possibility of masochistic entertainment, which the Underground Man is so ironically

⁵¹ Dostoevsky, 2001: 25.

grateful for. This completely undermines the libertarian assertion that the Underground Man's masochistic caprice is a backlash against determinism: the triumph of determinism, represented here by the hypothetically irreversible accomplishment of the Crystal Palace, actually *excludes* the possibility of such caprice.

7. Conclusion

In sum, I have argued that the Underground Man's inertia, the source of his caprice, derives from "heightened consciousness" leading to sceptical reflection and deliberation in the tradition of Hamlet, and not from belief in determinism. I have attempted to justify this reading through analysis of all relevant portions of the text, including passages which initially appear to lend support to the libertarian interpretation.

I agreed with Frank that the Underground Man's inertia is caused at least in part by the perceived elimination of moral responsibility and the resulting impossibility of laying blame. Frank argued this was brought about by his acceptance of determinism; I have argued that it proceeds instead from sceptical reasoning about the philosophical foundations of morality, spurred on by the findings of natural science—and moral prescriptions supposedly based on these findings—which he calls "laws of nature." Moreover, such *a posteriori* reasonings are in my view only *one* of the concrete ways in which the Underground Man's heightened consciousness contributes to his inertia. In general, his sceptical intellect demands indisputable "primary reasons" for action which can never be found, and thus dooms him *a priori* to inactivity. Why is this so? Why does the Underground Man allow himself to indulge in sceptical reflections that paralyze his existence? Whilst we have attained a good *description* of the Underground Man's inertia, we are not yet in a position to answer this question—the psychology behind it remains largely obscure. Thus, although we have seen that the libertarian approach to inertia is inadequate, and have gone some way towards a

better interpretation, it is evident that our explanation of the underground psychology is far from complete.

For now, having argued against the libertarian interpretation of his inertia, I maintain that there is no good evidence in this part of the novel to suggest that the Underground Man's caprice is a response to the threat to freedom posed by the idea of determinism. Frank and Jackson both maintain that caprice is such a response, a reaction equivalent, as Jackson says, to the "convulsions" of the convicts in *The House of the Dead*. On this basis, they attribute the Libertarian Argument to Dostoevsky: they claim that Dostoevsky argues, using the Underground Man as an illustration, that Nihilist utopian socialism is problematic because, since it incorporates the idea of determinism, it will cause its adherents to become capricious. We may now say that this means of extracting the Libertarian Argument from *Notes from Underground* fails, and, further, that it does not constitute an adequate explanation of the Underground Man's caprice. In the next chapter, I shall turn to the second source of evidence for the libertarian reading, which concerns the Underground Man's own attack on utopian socialism.

Chapter 4: Chernyshevsky's Crystal Palace

1. Introduction

As stated in Chapter 2, the libertarian approach to *Notes from Underground* consists of two strands: the contention that the Underground Man's caprice is caused by belief in determinism, and the contention that he attacks utopian socialism because it is founded on determinism. Supposing Dostoevsky's thought to be coherent, we should expect both of the strands to be false if either is. Thus, having argued in the previous chapter that the first strand is unsuccessful, it will not be surprising if the second, to be considered in this chapter, also fails. This is indeed what we shall find.

Frank and Scanlan maintain that the Underground Man attacks utopian socialism by way of the same psychological phenomena which, according to Frank and Jackson, he illustrates in his own character, namely, the caprice caused by deterministic threats to liberty. As they see it, the Underground Man puts forward the Libertarian Argument directly: the determinism inherent in utopian socialism contradicts the innate human need for liberty, thereby provoking—by a basic psychological mechanism—a capricious response which will destroy it. For the assessment of this approach, the most relevant passages are found in Chapters VII-X of Part I, where the Underground Man argues against utopian socialism directly. I shall argue that the brand of utopian socialism attacked by the Underground Man does not actually incorporate the idea of determinism, and so, more to the point, that he does not attack it because it does. This undermines the second and final strand of motivation for thinking that the Libertarian Argument can be derived from *Notes from Underground*, and, furthermore, confirms that the Underground Man's caprice is unrelated to the idea of determinism.

2. Rational Egoism and Determinism

In Chapters VII-IX, Chernyshevsky's Crystal Palace ideal is presented as a threat to free will. The Underground Man reacts to this threat with a sustained defence of caprice as the "most advantageous advantage." The libertarian approach depends upon "free will" here meaning *liberty*. As we saw in Chapter 2, there is good reason for thinking that when the Underground Man talks about freedom, he is typically talking about caprice, his "most advantageous advantage." However, in order to assess this approach charitably and allow the best interpretation to emerge as naturally as possible from the text of the *Notes*, for now I shall leave the significance of the terms "freedom" and "free will" undecided so as not to prejudge the Underground Man's meaning. Now, the Underground Man argues that the socialist utopia will fail because it is incompatible with free will. The question is, does it threaten free will because it entails determinism, or for some other reason? In order to answer this question, we should look more closely at the nature of the Crystal Palace ideal, and in particular at the most important theory upon which it is founded: rational egoism.

According to Scanlan, the rational egoism of the Nihilists has two components: "Co-existing somewhat uneasily in the thinking of the Rational Egoists were a descriptive thesis and a normative (prescriptive) thesis—a view of how human beings actually behave and a view of how they ought to behave."¹ The second, prescriptive component specified that people ought to act rationally and egoistically, in order most effectively to pursue their own advantage. For present purposes, the descriptive component is more interesting: it stated simply that people already *do* act in this way, and must do so always. Scanlan defines it thus:

The descriptive side of rational egoism was a deterministic theory of human motivation that is sometimes called "psychological egoism."
The Rational Egoists, denying free will, contended that human beings

¹ Scanlan, 2002: 65.

are necessitated by their nature to act as they do, and that their choices are always governed by their own interests.²

Psychological egoism formed the supposedly “scientific” foundation of Rational Egoism—scientific because it expressed the “natural law” that people invariably act in accordance with what they think are their own best interests.³

Here we have the crucial idea of determinism, which is linked to science and the laws of nature. Of course, Scanlan notes, the two components of rational egoism are not really compatible: the determinism of psychological egoism undermines the prescriptions of the normative component—how can people change their behaviour as the Nihilists prescribe, if they have no free will? Scanlan argues that Dostoevsky perceived the bipartite nature of rational egoism as well as the incompatibility of its parts:

The puzzles and questionable assumptions lurking in this effort to combine psychological and normative egoisms into a coherent theory are of course numerous, and the radical writers never adequately addressed them. [...] Dostoevsky, on the other hand, appears to have been fully aware of the complexities of Rational Egoism and of the problems created by the exclusion of freedom of the will from its theoretical structure. The Underground Man addresses both the descriptive and the normative theses and rejects them both, along with their supporting assumptions.⁴

In Scanlan’s view, the Underground Man argues against the descriptive component in the first chapters of the book, where he provides evidence from history, as well as his own behaviour, in support of the claim that people often *do* act irrationally and in ways which do not promote the fulfilment of their needs. We are to deduce from this that psychological egoism is not descriptively accurate.⁵ He then goes on to argue against the normative component in the later chapters of Part I, in which he claims

² Scanlan, 2002: 65.

³ Scanlan, 2002: 66.

⁴ Scanlan, 2002: 67.

⁵ Scanlan, 2002: 67-69.

that freedom of choice is the “most advantageous advantage,” i.e. the greatest need of all. Here, for Scanlan, he grants the truth of psychological egoism for the sake of argument, so that he may consider and reject the utopian socialists’ ideal on their own terms; the overriding need for freedom, the Underground Man contends, would make it impossible for the mechanistic stability of the Crystal Palace to endure.⁶

One obvious problem with Scanlan’s general line of interpretation is that if Dostoevsky *did* understand the incoherence of the Nihilists’ views, why didn’t he attack it? Blatant logical incoherence is a serious problem for any theory, and it would make no sense for an opponent to leave it unchallenged. Yet whether he perceived the contradiction or not, he did not exploit it. Not once does the Underground Man complain that his opponents are simultaneously commanding him to change his ways *and* trying to convince him that he has no free will—and so, presumably, no capacity to respond to their demands one way or the other. He takes for granted that their theory does at least make sense, and, on Scanlan’s interpretation, refutes the two components separately. Why? The answer to this question, I believe, is key to understanding Dostoevsky’s polemical approach. To state my conclusion in advance, it seems to me that he adopted a more charitable interpretation of rational egoism than Scanlan, which does away entirely with psychological egoism, and thereby resolves the problem of incoherence. As I shall argue below, that is to say, the theory which the Underground Man attacks is not founded on a commitment to determinism.

* * *

Let us first consider in more detail the theory of determinism which the Underground Man is supposed by libertarians to engage with. In *The Anthropological Principle in Philosophy*, Chernyshevsky claims that “moral” facts, like human thoughts and

⁶ Scanlan, 2002: 70-72.

actions, must be part of the normal causal order of the world, and can therefore be no more “free” than any physical or chemical process. He writes:

[P]resent-day psychology does not accept, for example, the assumptions that in one case a man performs a bad action because he wanted to perform a bad action, while in another case he performs a good action because he wanted to perform a good action. It says that the bad action, or the good action, was certainly prompted by some moral or material fact or combination of facts, and that the “wanting” is only the subjective impression which accompanies, in our consciousness, the genesis of thoughts or actions from preceding thoughts, actions, or external facts.⁷

Here we have the claim that determinism is true, free will is an illusion and moral responsibility in the traditional sense cannot exist. In support of this theory, Chernyshevsky considers an example of what would normally be considered an act of free will, namely, the decision to put one foot out of bed before the other. All things being equal, he thinks, we will always exit the bed in whatever way is most physiologically convenient at the time. He admits that we can (as we might ordinarily put it) *decide* to override this natural process with a *choice* to the contrary, but argues that this apparently free act of will is not as free as it seems:

Whence came the thought of displaying independence of external conditions? It could not have arisen without a cause. It was created either by something said in conversation with someone, or by the recollection of a previous dispute, or something like that.⁸

So even in cases like this, Chernyshevsky thinks, the idea of free will has no place: it dissolves when we stop to consider the fact that nothing—not even the act of wanting to act without a cause—actually arises without a cause, and therefore that thoughts must follow thoughts in the same way as physical events follow one other, like a chain of dominoes. Even if the psychological “laws” which describe the flow of thoughts

⁷ Edie et al., 1965: 35.

⁸ Edie et al., 1965: 35.

often remain obscure, Chernyshevsky believes they must exist and will in due course become known to science. Even without a complete science of human life, however, Chernyshevsky thinks we can state one general psychological law with certainty: that humans always act in whatever way they believe will maximize their own selfish advantage.⁹ Here we have the descriptive component of rational egoism as defined by Scanlan.

3. The Crystal Palace in *Notes from Underground*

Now, the question is whether this deterministic theory of rational egoism is what underpins the brand of utopian socialism which the Underground Man attacks. There is already some reason to think so, since, as we know, *Notes from Underground* is a polemical response to Chernyshevsky. On the other hand, Chernyshevsky clearly specifies in *What Is To Be Done?* that the citizens of his utopia have “complete will, yes, free will,” which implies that his theoretical commitment to determinism, quoted above, may have a rather complicated relationship with his utopian project.¹⁰ Let us turn directly to Dostoevsky’s text, therefore, to see whether we can ascertain the significance of determinism therein without needing to puzzle over the actual ideas of his polemical target.

The Crystal Palace attacked by the Underground Man depends on the possibility of tabulating human needs and the optimal means of fulfilling them, so that life can proceed smoothly and efficiently, but scientifically and therefore somewhat mechanically. This can be seen in the following passages, spoken by interlocutors:

And, since all desires and reasons can really be tabulated, since someday the laws of our so-called free choice are sure to be discovered, then, all joking aside, it may be possible to establish something like a table,

⁹ Chernyshevsky, 1953: 120ff.

¹⁰ Chernyshevsky, 1989: 378.

so that we could actually desire according to it. If, for example, someday they calculate and demonstrate to me that I made a rude gesture because I couldn't possibly refrain from it, that I had to make precisely that gesture, well, in that case, what sort of free choice would there be, especially if I'm a learned man and have completed a course of study somewhere? Why, then I'd be able to calculate in advance my entire life for the next thirty years.¹¹

[S]cience itself will teach man [...] that in fact he possesses neither a will nor any whim of his own, that he never did, and that he himself is nothing more than a kind of piano key or an organ stop; that, moreover, there still exist laws of nature, so that everything he's done has been not in accordance with his own desire, but in and of itself, according to the laws of nature.¹²

That man has never had either will or whim (ни воли, ни каприза) could mean that he "has never been capricious," in other words, has always been rational and desired his own advantage (even if he has not always known how best to identify or obtain this advantage). However, the analogy of musical apparatus (derived from the utopian socialist Charles Fourier, who envisaged the ideal society as a "harmony" of diverse elements¹³) strongly suggests determinism: piano keys are not self-motivated, but are moved only in accordance with external forces; they have no free will at all, whimsical or otherwise.

These passages, then, appear to show that the Underground Man's interlocutors do subscribe to determinism, and strongly suggest that they intend to found their utopian ideal on the assumption that free will does not exist. That being so, I shall contend that whilst the Underground Man's opponents may profess belief in determinism, they do so in opposition to their own fundamental goals and convictions, since, as we shall see, the idea of determinism does not underpin their rational egoism or

¹¹ Dostoevsky, 2001: 20.

¹² Dostoevsky, 2001: 18 (*PSS* 5: 112).

¹³ Frank, 1986: 325.

utopian socialism. This becomes increasingly apparent the further we investigate the interlocutors' proposal. Consider the following statement from an interlocutor:

Consequently, we need only discover these laws of nature, and man will no longer have to answer for his actions and will find it extremely easy to live. All human actions [...] will be tabulated [...] and will be entered on a schedule; or even better, certain edifying works will be published, like our contemporary encyclopedic dictionaries, in which everything will be accurately calculated and specified so that there'll be no more actions or adventures left on earth.¹⁴

The idea is that thanks to the discovery of psychological laws, we would be able to understand once and for all how we work—what makes us happy, angry, sad, and so on; we would be able to manufacture human happiness with the same scientific precision with which we can control the growth of plants. It would then be possible to develop an encyclopaedic compendium of all useful hypothetical imperatives—prescriptions which tell us how best to act in every possible situation, in order to maximize the fulfilment of our needs and desires. This initially seems to be a natural extension of psychological egoism, but in fact it coheres very poorly with the kind of determinism described above; it implies that people will behave predictably and in a law-bound manner, not because they will have no free choice, but, on the contrary, because they will *choose* to do so: they will choose to look at a compendium of hypothetical imperatives instead of deciding for themselves, in each and every case, what to do.

The compendium of prescriptions is clearly based on the psychological laws which ought, on Scanlan's reading, to belong to the discoveries of descriptive psychological egoism. Scanlan maintains that in this chapter the Underground Man is dealing only with the deterministic aspect of rational egoism. And yet these laws do not seem to be descriptive. As the Underground Man himself adds, when the laws of nature are discovered and utilised in this way, the Nihilists hope that "man will *voluntarily* stop

¹⁴ Dostoevsky, 2001: 18.

committing blunders.”¹⁵ The laws of nature upon which the Crystal Palace is founded, therefore, are of the same kind as those, discussed in the previous chapter, which the Underground Man blames for his inertia: rules by which humans may maximize the fulfilment of their needs, as a farmer maximizes the yield of his crops. Throughout his entire discourse, furthermore, the Underground Man assumes that we would be able, even if rational egoism were true, to go against the recommendations of the Crystal Palace compendium:

even if man really turned out to be a piano key [i.e. an object motivated solely by external forces], even if this could be demonstrated to him by natural science and pure mathematics, even then he still won’t become reasonable; he’ll intentionally do something to the contrary, simply out of ingratitude, merely to have his own way.¹⁶

What is clear above all is that the Underground Man believes it possible—and his Nihilist interlocutors do not deny it, even in the context of their most deterministic statements—to disobey the laws of nature upon which the Crystal Palace is founded: his whole argument against utopian socialism is that if and when these laws of nature are discovered, people will choose to flout them. If the laws were descriptive, it would not be possible to “disobey” them in the manner he anticipates and recommends. So they must be prescriptive: they must tell us not what we *actually will* do, as physical laws tell us how inanimate objects will behave under different circumstances, but what we *ought* to do. This flatly contradicts the interlocutor’s assertion, quoted above, that human beings are nothing but piano keys; both the Underground Man and his interlocutors assume that people are self-motivated and can make meaningful choices.

The fact that the Underground Man’s opponents do, like Chernyshevsky himself, *profess* the doctrine of determinism, as such, has little bearing on their utopian aspirations,

¹⁵ Dostoevsky, 2001: 18. Italics added.

¹⁶ Dostoevsky, 2001: 22.

and does not inform the plans of their Crystal Palace ideal.¹⁷ This conclusion is analogous to that reached, in the previous chapter, regarding the Underground Man's supposed adherence to determinism: even if he does believe in it, we found, he does not allow it to influence to any significant degree his other thoughts and actions. On the basis of these considerations, I contend that the Nihilists attacked by the Underground Man do not base their utopian ideal on the two-component theory of rational egoism described by Scanlan. They do think that people are rational and egoistic; but not that they *necessarily* behave rationally; only that humans are rational animals and so, in a manner of speaking, have no reason not to act rationally. Alternatively stated, they believe that humans are rational and egoistic *enough* that they would naturally be grateful for the "edifying works" of the Crystal Palace. This is weaker than deterministic psychological egoism because it does not assert that people literally cannot act irrationally, but it is still strong enough to motivate the utopian theory of the Crystal Palace, because it still implies that humans are fairly predictably rational. In other words, it supports the normative thrust of rational egoism without rendering it incoherent.

4. Free Will in the Crystal Palace

However, this much is also clear: the Underground Man does think that the Crystal Palace and its laws of nature pose a threat to free will. How can this be so, if, as I have just argued, the laws in question are not descriptive but prescriptive, and we can simply choose to disobey them? At this point, the disambiguation of "freedom" proposed in Chapter 2 is plainly called for. The question is easily answered if we bear in mind that when the Underground Man defends "freedom" he is referring to *caprice*,

¹⁷ Why then do they profess determinism at all? This is a difficult question, and one that I shall not attempt to answer here. It seems to me that they conceive of determinism primarily as a means to an end, as part of their general campaign to discredit tradition religious and romantic notions of human nature, rather than something they accept in all its actual implications.

the only kind of freedom he really cares about; so we should expect his primary contention to be that the Crystal Palace poses a threat to caprice. Why should the Underground Man think this way? This question, too, is an easy one: liberty may not be incompatible with prescriptive laws (understood as hypothetical imperatives), but caprice clearly is. Recall that caprice demands the absence not only of external constraints like cages and prisons, but of *internal* constraints including reason and morality. The prescriptive laws of the Crystal Palace are nothing other than the recommendations of reason and morality, and, as such, count as constraints on caprice in the same way that prisons may count as constraints on liberty. Thus it makes perfect sense for the Underground Man to fear the Crystal Palace as a threat to his freedom—even though it is not founded on determinism—since freedom in this case is merely caprice. Let us, however, turn to examine the Underground Man's actual polemic and the evidence for this reading which is to be found in the text itself. In what follows, I shall describe his attack on utopian socialism in more detail and, in particular, illustrate the way in which the Crystal Palace is revealed to be such a dangerous threat to caprice.

* * *

As stated, the Underground Man seems to understand the Nihilists' denial of free will differently from Scanlan, Frank and other scholars; he seems to adopt a more charitable interpretation of their determinism which is not incompatible with their normative ethics, because it does not imply the absolute *impossibility* of free will (or therefore of moral responsibility), but only its voluntary adherence to the prescriptions of reason informed by natural science. We find perhaps the clearest evidence for this at the end of Chapter VIII, when in describing his utopian aspirations the interlocutor does not suggest that human behaviour is or will be ultimately unfree, but that in the Crystal Palace people will *freely want* to behave in a predictable fashion. The Underground Man states this explicitly in the following passage:

You'll shout at me (if you still choose to favor me with your shouts) that no one's really depriving me of my will; that they're merely attempting to arrange things so that my will, by its own free choice, will coincide with my normal interests, with the laws of nature, and with arithmetic.

"But gentlemen, what sort of free choice will there be when it comes down to tables and arithmetic, when all that's left is two times two makes four? Two times two makes four even without my will. Is that what you call free choice?"¹⁸

As his response makes clear, what the Underground Man really fears is that his will might be compelled and apparently constrained, not because of the truth of determinism, but by *reason*; in other words, he is afraid that as a rational human being he would *inevitably choose* to act in accordance with the rational behavioural prescriptions made available in the Crystal Palace. He has good reason to be afraid, because he *is* rational, as demonstrated by the intellectual rigour of his sceptical "heightened consciousness." The utopian socialists wished to ascertain the most reasonable ways of satisfying the needs of human beings; but the Underground Man prefers not to know what the most reasonable courses of action are, so that he may decide what to do "freely," i.e. capriciously, without the interference of his domineering rationality. The more he cultivates his intelligence and learns of science and philosophy, therefore, the more he feels his rationality as a constraint on his will, and the more he feels impelled to attack reason and the rational egoism of the Nihilists.

"Two times two makes four," for example, is a statement derived from the "laws" of mathematics; it is reasonable to believe it to be true. By the same token, it makes sense to say—since rationality is compelling if anything is—that we are *compelled* to believe it. Nevertheless, we can, and this is the Underground Man's point, *choose* not to believe it; this is because reason can never *determine* or literally constrain our volition, but only compel it in the sense that we would be mad not to obey it. We can choose instead to believe that two times two makes five, and we can even put this into practice by being indignant when, for instance, after buying two apples and two oranges,

¹⁸ Dostoevsky, 2001: 23.

we find ourselves with only four pieces of fruit. It is in this way that we can disobey the “laws of nature” in the sense advocated by the Underground Man. We know exactly how he himself goes about rebelling against such laws, even before the advent of the Crystal Palace—he refuses to see a doctor about his liver ailment, for example, in spite of the fact that science has determined this to be the best course. If there is something wrong with your liver, science declares, see a doctor and take the prescribed cure. This is a “law of nature” in the Underground Man’s sense, because it is an imperative derived by reason from the findings of natural science. As such, there is no room for arbitrary will here; the law holds whether one *wills* it to or not. And that is the source of the Underground Man’s dismay: he wants free *will*, in the sense that he wants his volition to be completely free from the determining influence of rational imperatives, to be entirely arbitrary. If for every possible situation there was a prescribed course of action, as there already is in the case of matters of health, then there would always be something that one knows one *ought* to do. And this *ought* would hold whether one wanted it to or not. Of course, in general this doesn’t seem like such a bad thing; it is surely good that the most reasonable course of action has been discovered for cases of liver disease. That is precisely the point of the Nihilist “lovers of humanity” whom the Underground Man sets up as his opposition. But the Underground Man, hypersensitive as he is to any kind of constraint, thinks it is a very bad thing. Ultimately, faced with the hypothetical reality of the Crystal Palace he prefers insanity—that is, the total abandonment of reason—in order not to constantly feel constrained by the allure of rational courses of action. As a last resort, he says, “man would go insane deliberately in order not to have reason, but to have his own way!”¹⁹ Reason is the true threat, not determinism, and natural science is problematic only because it will arm reason with new prescriptions—just as medicine has already allowed reason to establish the “law of nature” that ill people ought to seek help from doctors.

¹⁹ Dostoevsky, 2001: 22.

This reading further allows us to make some sense of the apparently deterministic statements of the Underground Man and his interlocutors. If prescriptive laws are *always* followed, they can be treated as descriptive laws for the purpose of making predictions. For example, assuming one was perfectly rational, and was always aware of the most reasonable course of action, and *chose* to always act reasonably, one's behaviour would always be entirely predictable, even though it was the product of an entirely free will. In such a scenario the laws of reason, which are in fact *prescriptive*—they tell us what we *ought* to think and do—could be used to make predictions just *as if they were descriptive* like the laws of physics or chemistry. This is precisely the state of affairs that the utopian socialists hoped for, according to the Underground Man. Thus it is that he and his interlocutors can coherently speak of the elimination of free will and the predictability of human actions: in an ideally rational and ideally enlightened utopia, provided one chose in advance to be reasonable, there would be no possibility of choosing how to act *in particular instances*—having initially chosen to be reasonable, one would already be committed to following the predetermined courses of action specified in the guidebook to the Crystal Palace. (Again, however, free will isn't strictly eliminated, but only—as Jackson says—made “obsolescent.”) If the Crystal Palace were realised, the only way to avoid this predetermined existence would be to *decide not to be reasonable*. And this is precisely what the Underground Man recommends and believes will happen.

For the Underground Man, then, we can say that the Crystal Palace does carry with it the threat of a kind of determinism, which we might call *conditional determinism*. It is conditional on our prior commitment to reason; we can escape it through deciding to be unreasonable. Thus I disagree with Frank's statement that utopian socialism threatens to transform the individual into a “rational-ethical machine that can behave *only* in conformity with reason.”²⁰ With respect to freedom, entering the Crystal

²⁰ Frank, 1986: 328.

Palace would thus be the same as voluntarily giving oneself into slavery—in both cases there is a sense in which one ends up with no free will, but not in the sense that one's power of choice is not free. As such—assuming one is allowed to leave the Crystal Palace and rescind one's commitment to be rational—it does not imply the actual impossibility of free will or moral responsibility, in the way that scientific determinism does in the traditional interpretation advocated by libertarians.

* * *

As final justification for this reading, consider the following very telling passage, in which an interlocutor describes what will happen to freedom of choice when the laws of nature are made available as guidelines:

Well, and when all this has been analysed, calculated on paper [...] then, of course, all so-called desires will no longer exist. For if someday *desires are completely reconciled with reason*, we'll follow reason instead of desire simply because it would be impossible, *while retaining one's reason*, to *desire* rubbish, and thus knowingly oppose one's reason, and desire something harmful to oneself. . . .²¹

The all-important qualification—"while retaining one's reason"—proves that reason rather than determinism is ultimately the scourge of free choice. The "reconciliation" of desires with reason means, since reason is law-bound, that desires too will become law-bound. Even though these laws are not imposed by an external authority—they stem from our own innate rationality—they are unbending and universally valid. This is also why, throughout his discourse, it is so important for the Underground Man to destroy the assumption that humans *are* in fact necessarily rational and that reason occupies the most important place in human life. If he can prove that humans can and do choose to behave irrationally, then he can prove that the determinism of the Crystal Palace will not be unconditional, that rebellion will be possible (and, on the assumption that other people share his need for caprice, inevitable). Thus he

²¹ Dostoevsky, 2001: 20. First and second italics added.

argues first that reason makes up only a fraction of the “faculties of life,” and that human beings cannot be satisfied by the findings of reason alone.²² He then goes on to argue that reason has never occupied a particularly significant position in world history, that, indeed, history itself has never been rational. “In short,” he says, “anything can be said about history, anything that might occur to the most disordered imagination. There’s only one thing that can’t possibly be said about it—that it’s rational. You’ll choke on the word.”²³ Of course, the utopian socialists, subscribing to the developmental conception of history commonly associated with Hegel, say just that. The Underground Man aims to show, firstly, how naive the utopian socialists are for believing that the Crystal Palace could be established upon the dominion of reason, and, secondly, that even if it were possible, the total triumph of reason could never achieve the goal of satisfying our desires once and for all. Desires can never be totally “reconciled with reason,” as the socialists hope, because reason cannot possibly sanction what the Underground Man thinks is the most important desire of all, the desire to be free from all constraints—including reason itself. This is the “most advantageous advantage,” caprice, which “destroys all our classifications and constantly demolishes all systems devised by lovers of humanity for the happiness of mankind.”²⁴

If the above is correct, then the Underground Man does not attack the significance of reason in order to refute the descriptive component of rational egoism, as Scanlan believes; there is no descriptive component. Adopting this interpretation, therefore, we do not need to suppose that Dostoevsky perceived the two aspects of rational egoism, and their incompatibility, and yet wanted to attack each aspect on its own terms, without pointing out their incompatibility. We can account neatly for the same textual components of the *Notes*—the defence of free will, the attack on rationalism—without supposing that Dostoevsky unaccountably let go of what would have been an

²² Dostoevsky, 2001: 20.

²³ Dostoevsky, 2001: 22.

²⁴ Dostoevsky, 2001: 16.

excellent polemical opportunity, namely, to point out that his opponents had founded their social ideal on a contradiction.²⁵

5. Conclusion

In this chapter I have analysed the Underground Man's attack on utopian socialism in an attempt to assess the second strand of the libertarian theory of *Notes from Underground*. According to this approach, the Underground Man voices the Libertarian Argument directly: it is thought that he claims that the determinism of utopian socialism, through its incompatibility with free will, causes the caprice that will undermine it. We have seen that the kind of utopian socialism the Underground Man attacks is not founded on determinism, and that he only attacks it because of the threat posed to his pre-existing commitment to caprice by its rationalism. He puts forward what we can call the Argument from Caprice, the contention that utopian socialism will fail because it contradicts the basic human need for caprice. As such, the Underground Man's discourse does not support the libertarian interpretation.

With respect both to his inertia, and to his attack on utopian socialism, the Underground Man's primary concern is *reason*. Sceptical reasoning causes him to become inert, and the rationalism of the Crystal Palace is what provokes his ire and his Argument from Caprice. Still, the psychology underlying all of this remains almost entirely obscure. Why is reason such a problem for the Underground Man? Are misology—the hatred of reason—and the caprice it apparently causes simply basic human qualities? Dostoevsky surely cannot think so; we must continue to assume that it has a foundation in the pathology of the underground psychology. At this stage, however,

²⁵ We have seen that they do contradict themselves—they do believe both that determinism eliminates free will and that people are free—but, unlike in Scanlan's interpretation, that this contradiction does not suffuse and undermine their entire utopian theory; the notion of determinism is a useless appendage, and, on the whole, their belief in free will goes practically unchallenged.

I hope only to have established more clearly the data which our theory of the Underground Man's caprice must take into account, and demonstrated that a new approach to this data is needed. The libertarian interpretation is certainly right to attribute psychological importance to the attack on utopian socialism, which is the culmination of the Underground Man's reflections on his own character. Having examined his argument against utopian socialism in this chapter, we shall turn, in the next chapter, to investigate its psychological significance more directly.

Chapter 5: Romantic Idealism and Misology

1. Introduction

At the end of Chapter 2, we set out to criticize attempts to derive the Libertarian Argument from *Notes from Underground*, and, more generally, to understand the Underground Man's caprice. In Chapters 3 and 4, we considered two related libertarian approaches to *Notes from Underground*. Assessing the first approach involved examining the psychological basis of the Underground Man's inertia; assessing the second involved interpreting the Underground Man's direct attack on utopian socialism. I argued that neither approach succeeds in deriving the Libertarian Argument from the *Notes*. Indeed, it has become clear that the Underground Man is not ultimately concerned with determinism at all — determinism is not what causes him to become inert, and it is not what provokes his attack against utopian socialism, as the libertarian readings suggest. On the contrary, sceptical reasoning causes him to become inert, and the threat of its rationalism prompts him to attack utopian socialism.

Moreover, therefore, neither libertarian approach succeeds in explaining the psychology of caprice that presumably underpins Dostoevsky's actual argument against utopian socialism. *Reason* and its prescriptions are implicated in the genesis and the exacerbation of his caprice. In criticizing the libertarian approaches, then, we have gained a clearer understanding not only of the need for a new interpretation of Dostoevsky's polemic, but of the psychological phenomena under consideration as well. As we can see from his attack on the Crystal Palace, the Underground Man hates reason because, being capricious, he perceives its prescriptions as constraints. His misology is merely an aspect of his caprice. To better understand his caprice, then, it seems wise to investigate his misology further. As we shall see in what follows, this approach casts a new light on the Underground Man's attitudes and character, and

opens up the possibility of the new interpretation of caprice, and Dostoevsky's polemic against Chernyshevsky, to be developed in Part 2.

2. Normal Advantage

The Underground Man argues against utopian socialism on the grounds that it threatens to make capricious behaviour more difficult or impossible, through establishing a society of rational egoists in which everyone is always aware of (and so compelled by their own natural rationality to adopt) the most reasonable courses of action. I have called this the Argument from Caprice. We have yet to consider the place of this argument within the broader context of the *Notes*, and its full implications for our understanding of the underground psychology.

Direct engagement with utopian socialism begins in Chapter VII, and ends in the penultimate chapter of Part I, Chapter X. The Argument from Caprice is localized more specifically in Chapters VII, VIII and IX. Thus, in order to make psychological sense of this argument, we should firstly note that it does not occur in a vacuum: it is sandwiched between reflections pertaining more specifically to the Underground Man's own life and character. Moreover, as I shall argue below, this surrounding material does not cohere particularly well with the Argument from Caprice itself, at least when it is taken at face value. Psychological and polemical features drawn from the work as a whole make a straightforward interpretation problematic.

In this connection, we may firstly note that the Argument from Caprice, which is directed against utopian socialism, is part of a larger critique of what the Underground Man calls "normal advantage"¹—i.e. utility, or the satisfaction of bodily and emotional needs—and the rational, utilitarian behaviour which is directed towards such advantage. This critique extends throughout Part I of the *Notes*, though its contents

¹ Dostoevsky, 2001: 23.

are not entirely uniform; in fact, it is divided into two main blocks. In Chapters VII-IX, as we have seen, the idea of advantage, which is there represented primarily by utopian socialism, is set up against the need for caprice (the “most advantageous advantage”); this contains the Argument from Caprice. In preceding and succeeding chapters, however, we shall see that the idea of advantage is instead set up against the Underground Man’s *romantic idealism*, and criticized on broadly aesthetic grounds.² So there are two separate arguments against normal advantage: an argument from the incompatibility of advantage and caprice (the Argument from Caprice), and an argument from the incompatibility of advantage and romantic idealism. The relation between these two arguments, and the two groups of chapters which contain them, will be a primary concern in what follows, as I attempt to reassess the psychological significance of the Argument from Caprice in light of the exegetical failure of the libertarian reading.

Again, what we are ultimately concerned with here is making sense of why the Underground Man attacks rationality in these chapters, since this attack is a manifestation of his capriciousness, and should thus provide us with a means of understanding this caprice. Because we have already considered this attack in Chapter 4, above, I now turn to consider in more detail the Underground Man’s *other* mode of engaging with the idea of normal advantage, in which, so I shall argue, he adopts the standpoint of romantic idealism.

3. The Disadvantages of Romanticism

In Chapter VI, immediately prior to the beginning of his attack on rational egoism and utopian socialism, the Underground Man gives us an important clue—puzzling

² That the Underground Man’s hatred of reason is in some way bound to his romanticism has been recognized by some scholars, who have not, however, attempted to place this fact in the wider context of his attack on normal advantage or the polemic against Chernyshevsky more generally (e.g. Jones, 1976: 60; Leatherbarrow, 1981: 66).

in light of what follows it—to his thinking on the matter of “normal advantage.” Building on the descriptions of his inertia in preceding chapters, he ironically laments the fact that in life he has not simply been lazy rather than “inert.” Laziness can at least be a positive quality, he thinks, an authentic character trait, whereas inertia is really the absence of any such character. Supposing himself to have been a lazy “sluggard and a glutton,” he says, he would not have suffered the pangs of the underground psychology, and would have lived an entirely fulfilling and respectable life. He writes:

I knew a gentleman who prided himself all his life on being a connoisseur of Lafite. He considered this a positive virtue and never doubted himself. He died not merely with a clean conscience, but with a triumphant one, and he was absolutely correct. I should have chosen a career for myself too: I would have been a sluggard and a glutton, not an ordinary one, but one who, for example, sympathized with everything beautiful and sublime. [...] The “beautiful and sublime” have been a real pain in the neck during my forty years, but then it’s been *my* forty years, whereas then—oh, then it would have been otherwise! I would’ve found myself a suitable activity at once—namely, drinking to everything beautiful and sublime. [...] I would have sought out the beautiful and sublime in the nastiest, most indisputable trash. I would have become as tearful as a wet sponge. [...] And what a belly I’d have grown by then, what a triple chin I’d have acquired, what a red nose I’d have developed—so that just looking at me any passerby would have said, “Now that’s a real plus! That’s something really positive!” Say what you like, gentlemen, it’s extremely pleasant to hear such comments in our negative age.³

Due to its brevity, and its proximity to the heavier and more polemical themes of Chapters V and VII, this chapter initially appears to be little more than a comic interlude. In fact, however, I consider it vital to both polemical and psychological dimensions of the work. Essentially, in this chapter the Underground Man tells us, in ironic terms, what his life might have been like if he had concerned himself with his own

³ Dostoevsky, 2001: 14.

“normal advantage.” His aesthetic ideals, the sublime and beautiful, would not have been a “pain in the neck”—would not have prevented him from enjoying himself, or forced him to become inert—because he would have subordinated them to the satisfaction of his emotional and bodily needs, or his need for social approval and those of his sensuality. Furthermore, he would have been able to pursue this advantage with a “clear conscience,” in the sense that he would not have been guilty, in his own eyes, of betraying his own ideals or debasing himself. This is evidently because his “conscience” would in that case have been much less demanding: he would have had no honest appreciation for his ideals, and, as he says, he would have been able to find them realized in the most worthless “trash” of contemporary art and criticism—which to his high romantic taste is totally base and vulgar.⁴ Precisely because his ideals are in fact incompatible with the pursuit of his normal advantage, the only way he can pursue this advantage is by lessening his respect for these ideals. This is precisely what the Underground Man illustrates in this hypothetical scenario, in which, as a gluttonous aesthete, he continues to pay lip service to the “sublime and beautiful,” but contradicts their demands in practice.

* * *

Scanlan has argued for a contrary interpretation, and maintains that the Underground Man’s inert neglect of normal advantage actually derives from existential difficulties which undermine his sense of identity; he claims that for this reason the Underground Man does not in general *know* what his normal advantage is, and so, insofar as he has determinate interests at all, neglects them by default. According to Scanlan:

He finds that he cannot be “determined” to act by any particular perception, whether of his own interests or anything else. This leads him into meditations on the indeterminate identity of the conscious being—meditations that twentieth-century existentialist philosophers took as signs that Dostoevsky was an early champion of their philosophical

⁴ He gives examples pertaining to the controversial artist Ge and the radical satirist Saltykov-Shchedrin, one of the main enemies of the *pochvenniki* (Frank, 1986: 254).

orientation. Proto-existentialist or not, for our purposes the Underground Man's lamentations about his inability to *become* anything, to have a determinate identity, show that he finds nothing on the basis of which to fix *his* best interests: if he cannot define himself, how can he define *his* best interests?⁵

In my view, the Underground Man's eyes have always been open to his "true, normal interests" —he knows it is in his interests to go to the doctor about his liver ailment,⁶ he knows he ought to go the dentist about his toothache,⁷ and, as we have just seen, he knows he would have been much better off as a lazy glutton. Whether or not he has been unable to "define himself" or to "become anything" —as he says in relation to his inertia⁸—has not blinded him to these basic facts, which, after all, derive from the needs of human beings in general, and not from any particular identity or mode of existence which the Underground Man may have failed to adopt. It is clear that he *deliberately* rejects his own advantage in a way that he could not if, as Scanlan maintains, he did not know what his advantage consisted in.

4. Romanticism in Practice

It will be well to observe the manner in which the Underground Man's rejection of advantage manifests in practice, in his actual behaviour, and not merely in his philosophical reflections. This is because his reflections may appear to be somewhat inconsistent. For example, some confusion is caused by the Underground Man's own discussion, in Chapter I of Part II, of the difference between Russian and Western romanticism. He identifies himself with a kind of person very different from the hypercritical intellectual described above. I argued that he devotes himself to Hamletism,

⁵ Scanlan, 2002: 69.

⁶ Dostoevsky, 2001: 3.

⁷ Dostoevsky, 2001: 11.

⁸ Dostoevsky, 2001: 4.

rejects his advantage, because of his refusal to compromise his fastidiousness; here, however, he suggests that he has never actually allowed his romantic ideals to prevent him from pursuing his worldly ambitions in practice. This implies that his romanticism may be purely academic and have no real bearing on his inert rejection of advantage. He writes:

We Russians, generally speaking, have never had any of those stupid, transcendent German romantics, or even worse, French romantics, on whom nothing produces any effect whatever: the earth might tremble beneath them, all of France might perish on the barricades, but they remain the same, not even changing for decency's sake; they go on singing their transcendent songs, so to speak, to their dying day, because they're such fools. We here on Russian soil have no fools.⁹

"Our romantic," he writes in contrast, "has a very broad nature and is the biggest rogue of all, I can assure you of that. . . even by my own experience."¹⁰ Although they have just as great an appreciation of the "sublime and beautiful," in daily life the Russian romantics are nevertheless willing to concern themselves with very un-romantic practical matters without experiencing this pragmatic "versatility" as an affront to their ideals. They are not straightforwardly hypocritical, but their peculiarity is:

not to be reconciled with anyone or anything, but, at the same time, not to balk at anything; to circumvent everything, to yield on every point, to treat everyone diplomatically; never to lose sight of some useful, practical goal (an apartment at government expense, a nice pension, a decoration)—to keep an eye on that goal through all his excesses and his volumes of lyrical verse, and, at the same time, to preserve intact the "beautiful and sublime" to the end of their lives; and, incidentally, to preserve themselves as well, wrapped up in cotton like precious

⁹ Dostoevsky, 2001: 32. Dostoevsky is echoing Belinsky's opinion that Germans are indifferent to reality; they care only of grasping an ideal, and aren't concerned if reality falls short of it (see Von Gronicka, 1985, vol. 1: 200).

¹⁰ Dostoevsky, 2001: 32.

jewellery, if only, for example, for the sake of that same “beautiful and sublime.”¹¹

The Underground Man is certainly not a “transcendent romantic” of the French or German variety—should we then take him at his word and assume he is a “Russian” romantic of the kind described here?¹² He identifies himself as one and gives an example from his own life: “For instance, I genuinely despised my official position and refrained from quitting merely out of necessity, because I myself sat there working and received good money for doing it.”¹³ To agree with him here would be overly complacent, however. From what we have seen of his activities, it is clear that in general he is *not* one of the broad-natured Russian romantics. Certainly, he hasn’t entirely ignored practical matters, and has worked when necessary in order to ensure that he has been relatively comfortable throughout his life. On the other hand, we know from his autobiographical sketches that he has shown far less enthusiasm for advantage than have the Russian romantics he describes: we know that he turned down a good position after graduating from school, and became an economic and social failure as his cohort went on to humiliate him through their worldly success. Such negligence can only be a deliberate result of his haughtiness. So, although he lacks the absolute transcendence of the German and French romantics, who, he says, are totally indifferent to the actual world, he is nevertheless unwilling to compromise his ideals entirely in the “Russian” manner.¹⁴

¹¹ Dostoevsky, 2001: 32.

¹² Some scholars have accepted his claims in passing, e.g. Paris, 2008: 15, Lyngstad, 1975: 26, without seeking to draw significant conclusions therefrom.

¹³ Dostoevsky, 2001: 33.

¹⁴ It is also noteworthy that Apollon Grigoryev’s characterization (published after the Underground Man’s remarks, in the same journal—Dostoevsky’s *Epoch*) of Russian, French and German romantics is precisely opposed to the Underground Man’s: the German, he says, could remain morally steadfast, pragmatic and level-headed despite “the most phantasmagoric hallucinations,” while the Russian “accepted every idea, no matter how wild and amusing it may have been, and carried it to its furthest limit, and moreover put it into operation” (Grigoryev, 1962: 88). This strikes me as being another reason not to take the Underground Man at his word.

To be sure, he has made no serious attempt to actually realize these ideals in practice. This can hardly be held against his earnestness, however, because it is clear that he could not have done so no matter how much he wanted to. The Underground Man's daydreams—presumably the most unfettered expressions of his romantic ideals because of their complete detachment from reality—are not merely improbable, but quite literally impossible to realise. He gives the following example which, though recalled twenty years after the fact in a spirit of sarcastic self-mockery, gives a clear indication of the kind of hopes which he has cherished:

[...] being a famous poet and chamberlain, I would fall in love; I'd receive an enormous fortune and would immediately sacrifice it all for the benefit of humanity, at the same time confessing before all peoples my own infamies, which, needless to say, were not simple infamies, but contained a great amount of "the beautiful and sublime," something in the style of *Manfred*.¹⁵ Everyone would weep and kiss me (otherwise what idiots they would have been), while I went around barefoot and hungry preaching new ideas and defeating all the reactionaries of Austerlitz. Then a march would be played, a general amnesty declared, and the Pope would agree to leave Rome and go to Brazil; a ball would be hosted for all of Italy at the Villa Borghese on the shores of Lake Como, since Lake Como would have been moved to Rome for this very occasion; then there would have been a scene in the bushes, etc., etc.—as if you didn't know.¹⁶

The strict impossibility of this fantasy is emphasized by the Underground Man: it involves the physical transportation of Lake Como across Italy. Of course, this particular detail is an embellishment, but its purpose is to highlight the gulf already separating the young Underground Man's romantic ideals from the realm of possibility. Thus the fact that he has not striven constructively towards realizing his dreams should not be taken to show that he subordinated them to his normal advantage in practice, in the manner of the "Russian" romantic. On the contrary, taking their

¹⁵ The Underground Man refers significantly to the romantic anti-hero of Lord Byron's *Manfred* (Byron, 2000: 274-314). I shall return to this point later, in Chapter 9.

¹⁶ Dostoevsky, 2001: 40f.

impossibility into account, he has devoted himself to them with considerable effort. His efforts consist in refusing to become complacent or to enjoy the worldly advantages available to him. Though the activities recommended by his romantic ideals are impossible, it is not impossible to refrain from the activities forbidden by them; it is in this way that he is able to *act* on his ideals by doing nothing at all and becoming inert, by giving up a promising career, the respect of his peers, and the opportunity to live more comfortably. This is what sets him apart from the “Russian” type and proves, once again, that he really has actively sacrificed his “normal advantage” for the sake of his romantic ideals.

Why though does the Underground Man present himself dishonestly as a “Russian” romantic? He extolls the advantages of Russian romanticism in the same way as he says that his friend the connoisseur of Lafite was “absolutely right,” and that he himself ought to have become a romantic glutton. In mocking “those stupid, transcendent German romantics, or even worse, French romantics” the Underground Man mocks himself, for he too has striven to “remain the same, not even changing for decency’s sake,” stubbornly holding on to his ideals even in the face of his own best interests. But his blatantly ironic tone places him above this mockery, and inverts it: in reality he is mocking those who take such mockery seriously, namely, the Russian “romantics” who do not disdain “to circumvent everything, to yield on every point, to treat everyone diplomatically” so as to ensure their own comfort even as they pontificate on everything sublime and beautiful. The air of counterfeit camaraderie he builds by identifying himself as a fellow Russian romantic—for “we here on Russian soil have no fools”—heightens this irony, which goes over the heads of his imaginary readers and interlocutors. Of course, there is an even higher level of mockery here; for the Underground Man is well aware that the moral high ground he occupies is less than worthless and has cost him not only his “normal advantage” but his self-respect as well. Not only has he failed to live up to his ideals, the degradation he has endured in their name is a travesty of those ideals themselves: his wretched “underground” existence is the most unromantic imaginable. Tragically, then, there is a very real

sense in which the hypocritical romantics he despises are less offensive to his ideals, and are indeed “absolutely right.” But this is by the by. Here we need only remark that it is constancy to these ideals, however misguided, that has led the Underground Man to become the way he is.

* * *

At this point it will be worth clearing up a confusion which may have become apparent. I stated just now that his devotion to his romantic ideals forces the Underground Man to become inert: he does nothing because there is nothing he can do which would satisfy his ideals; he has no means of realizing them. Doesn’t this contradict the fact, previously established, that his sceptical reasoning is what causes him to become inert through undermining his faith in “primary reasons”? Shouldn’t his sceptical reasoning undermine his devotion to romantic idealism as well, so as to be the *sole* cause of his inertia?

Here we may observe that the Underground Man’s inertia consists not in the abandonment of all *principles*, but in the abandonment of constructive, deliberate, principled *activity* (taking revenge, forgiving etc.) and the authentic character traits that correspond to such activities. This inertia, I believe, derives from the fact that whilst he does in one sense have a guiding “idea,” namely romantic idealism, he is unable to act constructively upon it because his sceptical reasoning makes him aware of the futility (irrationality) of all such activity. Thus the manner in which his scepticism is directly responsible for his inertia, through demanding and then undermining the provision of “primary reasons” for action, is perfectly compatible with his romantic idealism. Indeed, his devotion to romantic idealism is precisely what means, in many cases, that this demand for primary reasons will not be fulfilled, since, as we have just seen, his romantic ideals cannot possibly be realized and so cannot possibly be rationally justified: *eo ipso*, no “primary reasons” for action can be found among them. What’s more, we may note that the fastidiousness of his intellectual conscience, his “heightened consciousness,” is at the same time the source of his sceptical reasoning

and the reason why he is so stubbornly conscientious in his devotion to his ideals; these are merely the two ways in which, as he says, the “direct result of consciousness is inertia.” Here we are thus shown, from another angle, precisely how the Underground Man’s heightened consciousness is to blame for his inertia. (As such, we may observe, the Underground Man’s inertia is in general caused by the *conflict* between his idealism and his rationalism, and not one or the other in isolation. This is an important point that I shall return to in Chapter 10.)

* * *

I have endeavoured to establish that the Underground Man neglects his normal advantage for the sake of his romantic ideals, and outlined the manner in which I believe he does so in practice. This is illustrated most concretely in the tale of his encounter with his former schoolmates, which precedes his confrontation with the prostitute Liza. This tale, which harks back to the Underground Man’s early manhood and the initial stages of his underground condition, is presented in the second part of the novel. In Chapters III and IV of Part II, the young Underground Man foists himself on a group of his former schoolmates, from whom he has become almost entirely estranged, as they celebrate a farewell feast for the wealthy and universally admired officer Zverkov. In school, the Underground Man had clashed with Zverkov, but on a relatively even footing: he had been able to use his superior wit to score some victories in spite of his social inferiority.¹⁷ In meeting Zverkov again as a young man, with an even greater gulf between their social standings, the Underground Man hopes that he can demonstrate once and for all his cultural pre-eminence and prove that he is worthy of respect. “But that’s not all,” he says:

in the strongest paroxysm of cowardly fever I dreamt of gaining the upper hand, of conquering them, of carrying them away, compelling them to love me—if only “for the nobility of my thought and my indisputable wit.” They would abandon Zverkov; he’d sit by in silence and

¹⁷ Dostoevsky, 2001: 44.

embarrassment, and I'd crush him. Afterward, perhaps, I'd be reconciled with Zverkov and drink to our *friendship* [...].¹⁸

Naturally, these romantic dreams come to naught and he is totally crushed and humiliated. Without even recognizing the Underground Man as a potential "opponent," Zverkov treats him with fatherly condescension; he is immediately embarrassed and loses his composure, he drinks too much, and, having made a fool of himself by attempting to insult Zverkov, sanctimoniously paces up and down the room for three hours as the friends chat amongst themselves. Dostoevsky takes pains to ensure that the Underground Man's humiliation is complete. In spite of this crushing failure, however, he still dreams of realizing his hopes and winning Zverkov over: "Oh, if you only knew what thoughts and feelings I'm capable of," he thinks to himself, "and how cultured I really am!"¹⁹ This episode comes to a head as the friends leave the Underground Man alone in the restaurant and depart for a brothel. He then works himself into a frenzy of wounded vanity and decides, in Chapter V, to rush after them and challenge Zverkov to a duel. On the way to the brothel, he allows his romantic dreams to take hold of him fully:

"[...] Fifteen years later when they let me out of jail, a beggar in rags, I'll drag myself off to see him. I'll find him in some provincial town. He'll be married and happy. He'll have a grown daughter. . . . I'll say, 'Look, you monster, look at my sunken cheeks and my rags. I've lost everything—career, happiness, art, science, a *beloved woman*—all because of you. Here are the pistols. I came here to load my pistol, and . . . and I forgive you.' Then I'll fire into the air, and he'll never hear another word from me again. . . ."

I was actually about to cry, even though I knew for a fact at that very moment that all this was straight out of Silvio [i.e. Pushkin's *The Shot*] and Lermontov's *Masquerade*.²⁰

¹⁸ Dostoevsky, 2001: 49.

¹⁹ Dostoevsky, 2001: 55.

²⁰ Dostoevsky, 2001: 59.

Automatically borrowing a romantic cliché from Pushkin and Lermontov, he projects his situation onto a fantasy world which is capable of meeting his aesthetic and emotional demands. In combination with the anticipated chivalry of this denouement, the suffering implied by his “sunken cheeks and rags” —in reality, his ridiculous behaviour and trousers with a yellow stain on one knee—elevates him in his mind to the stature of a tragic hero. It is on the basis of this fantasy that the Underground Man attempts to act and prove himself. Because it is just a fantasy, however, reality confounds his schemes and his actions have disastrous consequences; in this case, he gets off relatively lightly because the friends have already left the brothel by the time he arrives, and his plan to challenge Zverkov is simply abandoned. In general, however, his dedication to such illusions must lead only to the kind of humiliation and defeat he experienced in the restaurant. Significantly, none of this is lost on the Underground Man himself:

The fact of the matter was that at that very moment I was more clearly and vividly aware than anyone else on earth of the disgusting absurdity of my intentions and the whole opposite side of the coin, but . . .²¹

This shows that, not being stupid, he was always aware of his real circumstances and where his best interests really lay—he knew what he had to do to avoid further strife and embarrassment—but that he persisted in his romantic delusions of grandeur regardless. As such, it is clear that the Underground Man *deliberately* disengaged with reality and self-consciously pursued a ruinous course of action based on his literary fantasy. He was neither ignorant of his own advantage, nor motivated entirely by caprice, but deliberately sacrificed his advantage for the sake of his romantic strivings. We may note in passing that this was the only occasion (mentioned in the novel) on which he allowed his ideals to *positively* motivate his behaviour; after this point, we are led to suppose, he realized once and for all the stupidity of attempting to actually realize his ideals, and became “inert.” Whether in this Quixotic attempt to challenge

²¹ Dostoevsky, 2001: 58.

Zverkov, or in his mature Hamletism, however, his romantic ideals have always been to blame for his rejection of advantage.

5. Caprice Attacks

It is only after the short and apparently digressive Chapter VI of Part I—designed to make clear that his romantic ideals have prevented him from pursuing his normal advantage—that the Underground Man launches into his more famous critique of rational egoism, utilitarianism and utopianism, and his theoretical vindication of caprice as “most advantageous advantage.” This new discussion may initially appear to have little in common with what immediately preceded it, but the Underground Man ties them together by beginning the new chapter with a passing reference to the so-called “golden dreams” of Chapter VI, with its connoisseur of Lafite; what follows is his famous precis of rational egoism:

But these are all golden dreams. Oh, tell me who was first to announce, first to proclaim that man does nasty things simply because he doesn't know his true interest; and that if he were to be enlightened, if his eyes were to be opened to his true, normal interests, he would stop doing nasty things at once and would immediately become good and noble, because, being so enlightened and understanding his real advantage, he would realise that his own advantage really did lie in the good; and that it's well known that there's not a single man capable of acting knowingly against his own interest; consequently, he would, so to speak, begin to do good out of necessity. Oh, the child! Oh, the pure, innocent babe!²²

So begins the Underground Man's attack on utopian socialism. He goes on to elaborate the Argument from Caprice which we examined in Chapter 4, above. I would argue that reading such passages in light of what preceded them in Chapters I-VI—

²² Dostoevsky, 2001: 15.

namely, the Underground Man's descriptions of his own heightened consciousness, inertia, spite—should give us an indication of one of the ways in which he thinks people can go against their own "advantage." In Chapter VI we saw that *his* own advantage, his "golden dreams," lay in being a lazy, self-satisfied and hypocritical aesthete. The example is of course presented ironically—laziness is hardly a respectable occupation—and, as part of his satire on hypocrisy, the Underground Man thereby heaps scorn on the shallow aspirations of less cultivated people. Nevertheless, along with the Zverkov episode and the descriptions of his youthful "dreaming," it shows both that he always had a clear sense of his normal advantage, and that he decided to forgo it for the sake of his unrealistic romantic ideals.

However, as we know, he quickly proceeds beyond an apology for *this* decision, which, if eccentric, is at least comprehensible, to a much more ambitious defence of caprice and whim in general. This shift gives rise to a problem which I do not believe has been appreciated before, namely, that the Underground Man appears to contradict himself on one of the most crucial points in his discourse. In the earlier chapters of the book, culminating in Chapter VI, and in the reminiscences of Part II, when he purposefully goes against his own advantage he does so for the sake of a positive ideal—ostensibly, romantic idealism. But in Chapter VII he begins to argue that in general, people go against their advantage for no reason at all, that is, *capriciously*, and defends this tendency as right and normal. And he claims that this is the only thing that truly matters: "After all," he says at the end of Chapter IX, "I'm not standing up for suffering here, nor for well-being, either. I'm standing up for. . . my own whim and for its being guaranteed to me whenever necessary."²³

This seems obviously to contradict the way he portrays his own opinions and behaviour, and the examples he draws from his life experiences; certainly, his actions have been "whimsical" in the weaker sense that they have been idiosyncratic and often self-defeating, but they have not been capricious in the sense of being directed solely

²³ Dostoevsky, 2001: 25.

by and for the sake of his whim. However fruitlessly and negatively, they *have* been oriented with reference to an ideal: as we have seen, it is precisely because of his uncompromising idealism that he has, in his own life, rejected “normal advantage” and become “inert.”

6. Resolving the Contradiction

How can we make sense of this apparent contradiction? Why does the Underground Man argue for the omnipotence of caprice in Chapters VII-IX, when in other chapters he makes clear that his own activity (and lack thereof) has not been motivated by caprice, but instead by romantic idealism? As we shall see, the matter is further complicated by the fact that in Chapter X, apparently the culmination of his polemic against utopian socialism, he returns to his earlier mode of rancorous idealism, and faults the Crystal Palace on moral-aesthetic grounds rather than through the Argument from Caprice of Chapters VII-IX. What’s more, he even seems to repudiate the contents of these chapters directly—something which has not been adequately appreciated by scholars of Dostoevsky’s social philosophy. Let us now turn to consider Chapter X in detail, so as to ascertain exactly how and why the Underground Man contradicts himself.

It is known that Chapter X was radically altered by the censors, to the point that Dostoevsky considered the published version to be unintelligible, and to completely obscure the suggestion of a Christian resolution to the problems posed earlier in the book (as he complained to his brother in a letter).²⁴ As such, it is necessary to address the exegetical difficulties surrounding Chapter X before attempting to draw significant conclusions from its contents. As stated, the material damaged by the censors concerned Dostoevsky’s attempt to introduce a positive Christian element into the

²⁴ Letter to Mikhail Dostoevsky dated March 26, 1864 (Dostoevsky, 1987: 191).

negative climax of part one. According to Frank, the “need for faith and Christ” was to be derived from the Underground Man’s own utopian strivings. He argues that the Underground Man raises the possibility of a new utopian ideal, called the “crystal building” or “crystal edifice” (хрустальное здание) in rather subtle contrast to the “crystal palace” (хрустальный дворец) of his socialist interlocutors. For Frank, this “edifice” is founded on recognition of the spiritual needs of human beings, rather than the materialistic rationalism which underpins the “palace.” Frank writes:

Dostoevsky thus indicates that the underground man, far from rejecting all moral ideals in favour of an illimitable egoism, is desperately searching for one that would truly satisfy his spirit. Such an ideal would be one which, rather than spurring the personality to revolt in rabid frenzy, would instead lead to a willing surrender in its favour. Such an alternative ideal would thus be required to recognize the autonomy of the will and the freedom of the personality, and to appeal to the moral nature of man rather than to his reason and self-interest conceived as working in harmony with the laws of nature. For Dostoevsky, this alternative ideal could be found in the teachings of Christ; and from a confusion that still exists in the text, we can catch a glimpse of how he may have tried to integrate this alternative into the framework of his imagery.²⁵

The “confusion” alluded to is the distinction between “palace” and “edifice,” the latter of which Frank takes to adumbrate the need for a Christian solution. He points out that the censors may have been shocked by the association of socialist and religious terminology, and excised the Christianized image of the Crystal Palace as potentially subversive. In fact, however, the verbal distinction between “palace” and “edifice” is not consistently maintained: Dostoevsky uses the former term in Chapters VII and IX; then in Chapter X he switches wholesale to the latter, even when referring to the utopian socialist ideal. For instance, the first use of “edifice” is a clear reference to the ideal of the interlocutors, i.e. the socialist Crystal Palace—“You believe in the

²⁵ Frank, 1986: 329.

crystal edifice,” says the Underground Man.²⁶ And then, later, “[...] I myself have just rejected the crystal edifice [...].”²⁷ As such, I do not believe it is possible to draw any firm conclusions from the *terminological* peculiarities of Chapter X, whether because the chapter was garbled by the censors, or because Dostoevsky simply wasn’t verbally consistent. (Thus it scarcely matters that both terms are often translated indiscriminately into English as “palace.”²⁸) Regardless, Frank is certainly right in this respect: the Underground Man does introduce the idea of his own utopian ideal, which he contrasts with the socialist utopia in terms of its ability to satisfy those of his needs which are not purely material, and which would be spurned as hopelessly romantic by the socialists. He does so using an analogy, in which he compares a chicken coop with an actual palace or mansion. He admits that the chicken coop—which represents the utilitarian parsimony of the socialist Crystal Palace—may be just as good as the mansion when it comes to having a roof over one’s head during a storm, but denies that we should, on account of this fact alone, rate it to be just as good as the mansion in general and in all respects:

Don’t you see: if it were a chicken coop instead of a palace [дворца], and if it should rain, then perhaps I could crawl into it so as not to get drenched; but I would still not mistake a chicken coop for a palace out of gratitude, just because it sheltered me from the rain. You’re laughing, you’re even saying that in this case there’s no difference between a chicken coop and a mansion. Yes, I reply, if the only reason for living is to keep from getting drenched.²⁹

The utopian socialists, figuratively speaking, have claimed that the mansion has no genuine advantage over the chicken coop, because there are no genuine needs beyond “keeping dry” and other purely material concerns. “But what if I’ve taken it into my

²⁶ Dostoevsky, 2001: 25 (PSS 5: 120: “Вы верите в хрустальное здание [...]”), translation altered (writing “edifice” instead of “palace”).

²⁷ Dostoevsky, 2001: 26, translation altered (writing “edifice” instead of “palace”).

²⁸ This is the case in the translations of, e.g. Kentish, Garnett, Katz, Wilks (Dostoevsky, 1991, 1992, 2001, 2009(a)); the distinction is observed by some more recent translations, e.g., Jakim and Zinovieff and Hughes (Dostoevsky, 2009(b), 2014).

²⁹ Dostoevsky, 2001: 25f. (PSS 5: 120).

head,” replies the Underground Man, “that this is not the only reason for living, and, that if one is to live at all, one might as well live in a mansion? Such is my wish, my desire.”³⁰

From Dostoevsky’s letter it is quite natural to deduce, with Frank, that the mysterious new ideal—the genuine “mansion”—mentioned by the Underground Man is, or somehow adumbrates, Dostoevsky’s own Christian solution. This does not seem straightforwardly correct, however. Frank is right that it is derived from something other than materialistic rationality, and that it is inconsistent with the “laws of nature,” rather than being based on them; I believe he is wrong to deduce from this, however, that it has anything to do with Christianity. From the text itself, it is clear that the utopian ideal posited by the Underground Man is not at all Christian but is derived from the romantic idealism of his youthful “dreams,” from writers like Pushkin and Byron; it is aesthetically rather than spiritually motivated. We can see this in what remains concerning the Underground Man’s alternative utopia:

But let’s say that the crystal palace [здание] is a hoax, that according to the laws of nature it shouldn’t exist, and that I’ve invented it only out of my own stupidity, as a result of certain antiquated, irrational habits of my generation. But what do I care if it doesn’t exist? [...] Laugh, if you wish; I’ll resist your laughter and I still won’t say I’m satiated if I’m really hungry. I know all the same that I won’t accept a compromise, an infinitely recurring zero, just because it exists according to the laws of nature and it *really* does exist. I won’t accept as the crown of my desires a large building with tenements for poor tenants to be rented for a thousand years and, just in case, with the name of the dentist Wagenheim on the sign.³¹

The “antiquated, irrational habits” of his generation are evidently the more idealistic tendencies of the 1840s, whose radicals had been educated on romantic literature and philosophy, as opposed to the hard-line nihilism of the present-day (1860s)

³⁰ Dostoevsky, 2001: 26.

³¹ Dostoevsky, 2001: 26 (PSS 5: 120). Wagenheim was apparently a common name for dentists in Saint Petersburg (Dostoevsky, 2001: 11n7).

intelligentsia. The Underground Man will not accept the Crystal Palace—now likened more realistically to a tenement block—simply because it is the best we can hope for in real life. We may observe that it represents “normal advantage” in precisely the same way as the lazy aestheticism he rejected in Chapter VI: he recognizes it as being more comfortable than his underground way of life, but rejects it out a sense of moral-aesthetic dignity appropriate to his romantic idealism. This also recapitulates what the Underground Man said earlier (in Chapter III) about what he called the “absurdity of absurdities”—the pragmatic maxim that one ought to give up one’s ideals if they are unrealizable.³² In a similar vein, the Underground Man also alludes to the example of the toothache, which he presented in Chapter IV as an illustration of “aimless pain,” which his “consciousness finds so humiliating” because it undermines his romantic conceptions of human dignity: “in spite of all possible Wagenheims,” he wrote, “you’re still a complete slave to your teeth; [and] if someone so wishes, your teeth will stop aching, but if he doesn’t so wish, they’ll go on aching for three more months.”³³

Compared to the high-flown sufferings of a Childe Harold or a Manfred,³⁴ the romantic heroes of Lord Byron, envied by the Underground Man for their tragic nobility,³⁵ the toothache is an indignity and embarrassment. It is utterly humiliating for a human being—especially a self-proclaimed paragon of higher culture like the Underground Man—to suffer at the combined mercy of his own teeth and the dentist Wagenheim, who is presumably an utterly prosaic individual, barren of sublimity, and emblematic of everything the Underground Man despises.³⁶ The toothache—much like the liver complaint with which the *Notes* are introduced—is thus a supreme example of the

³² Dostoevsky, 2001: 10.

³³ Dostoevsky, 2001: 11.

³⁴ Byron, 2000: 19-206; 274-314.

³⁵ Dostoevsky, 2001: 40f.

³⁶ For an example of the way Germans are typically characterized by Dostoevsky, see *The Gambler*, Chapter 4 (Dostoevsky, 2010: 147f.). He presents them as being hard-working but spiritually limited and unable to grasp non-material values such as art. Denigration, mockery and usage of German characters as “comic relief” is typical of nineteenth-century Russian literature (Diment, 1998: 29). See Section 5.1 of Chapter 9, below, for an example from Gogol.

futility of romantic idealism: in spite of all his flights into the empyrean realms of the sublime and beautiful, the Underground Man is still subservient to the most contemptible functions of his body, and in general to “the whole system of natural laws about which you really don’t give a damn, but as a result of which you’re suffering none the less.”³⁷ Unwilling to ignore reality dishonestly in the manner of a “transcendent” French romantic, he is prepared to accept that this state of affairs is inevitable; but he refuses to reconcile himself with it on account of this inevitability: “I won’t accept a compromise, an infinitely recurring zero, just because it exists according to the laws of nature and it *really* does exist.”³⁸ If the best we can expect from reality is a disappointment, “an infinitely recurring zero,” then the Underground Man prefers not to deal with reality on its own terms—that there are no other terms, of course, means that he simply misses out on the bargain.

The socialist Crystal Palace, in contrast, is just such a compromise, and this is why the Underground Man hates it so much. It represents the ultimate capitulation to the mundane elements of the natural world and human nature. From the Underground Man’s perspective, utopian socialism can only qualify as “utopianism” through changing the standards by which such things are judged, and elevating that which is possible into an ideal *simply because it is possible* (at least according to the findings of “natural science,” i.e. Nihilism), and not because it actually inspires respect. This idea of capitulation was also prefigured in Chapter VI: the connoisseur of Lafite was able to “die with a triumphant conscience” only because his conscience—his sense of moral-aesthetic dignity—was so much less demanding than the Underground Man’s, for whom moral-aesthetic ideals can only be a “pain in the neck,” which is to say, prevent him from accepting a gratifying compromise at their expense.

The Underground Man’s version of the crystal edifice, as such, must be an embodiment of his romantic ideals which is impossible simply because it does away with tenements and Wagenheims—no doubt it is better represented by something more

³⁷ Dostoevsky, 2001: 11.

³⁸ Dostoevsky, 2001: 26.

along the lines of Manfred's castle in the Bernese Alps, in which something so mundane as a toothache is completely out of place and hardly conceivable. According to Frank, however, the ideal sought by the Underground Man is to be "found in the teachings of Christ"—he implies that the Underground Man, if only he knew where to look, would find satisfaction in Christianity. Of course, Frank is not suggesting that this Christian ideal would appeal to the Underground Man in his current state, but only that it would, if he could learn to accept it as an ideal, satisfy the needs which led him to spurn the Crystal Palace.³⁹ According to Frank, these needs concern "the autonomy of the will and the freedom of the personality," and thus pertain to "the moral nature of man rather than to his reason and self-interest conceived as working in harmony with the laws of nature."⁴⁰ It seems to me that Frank's understanding of the needs which motivate the Underground Man can only stem from his reading of Chapters VII-IX, which we considered in Chapter 4, above. Even if we were to take these chapters at face value, I argued that the kind of freedom championed there by the Underground Man—caprice—is diametrically opposed to the kind of *moral autonomy* Dostoevsky takes to be embodied in Christianity, which demands a sacrifice of personal liberties for the sake of altruistic morality. As such, even if we take Chapters VII-IX to express the Underground Man's genuine spiritual needs, as I believe Frank has done, we should not conclude that he would find satisfaction in a Christian utopia of the kind Dostoevsky may have attempted to adumbrate in Chapter X. Moreover, if we look instead to the needs expressed by the Underground Man in Chapter X itself, and in other parts of the book, we find that they do not pertain to freedom at all—whether caprice or moral freedom—but to the unrealistic projections of his bookish romanticism, in which *points d'honneur* are settled with duels, and the hero always shoots into the air in imitation of Pushkin's Silvio; or in which he confesses his sublime and beautiful crimes "in the style of Manfred" to awestruck crowds around the

³⁹ Frank, 1986: 328-331. In fact, I am prepared to agree with Frank here—but only at a very high level of generality, and not with the details of his proposal (see Section 3 of Chapter 10, below).

⁴⁰ Frank, 1986: 329.

artfully repositioned Lake Como in Rome.⁴¹ That Dostoevsky's Christian utopia would not be able to satisfy *these* needs should be clear enough. Even if we divest from them their most obviously unchristian characteristics, they are fundamentally egoistic—almost ego-theistic—and thus totally incompatible with the spirit of humble self-abnegation demanded by Dostoevsky's ideal of Christian brotherhood. Thus, in sum, it is clear that the Underground Man's alternative utopian ideal does not approximate or foreshadow Dostoevsky's, but embodies the same romantic ideals which, as we have seen, motivate his thoughts and behaviour throughout the bulk of the novel.

If Frank is wrong about Chapter X, however, how are we to suppose that Dostoevsky originally tried to motivate "the need for faith and Christ," as he says in his letter? I shall attempt to answer this question more thoroughly in Chapter 10; at this stage, the following brief remarks may suffice. I believe we are to take from the Underground Man's romanticism the Christian principle that "man does not live by bread alone" — which Dostoevsky understood to mean that the utilitarian parsimony of the tenement block is inadequate to the needs of human nature. The Underground Man denies along with Dostoevsky that "the only reason for living is to keep from getting drenched," i.e. that human needs are fundamentally no different from those of a chicken or an ant. But we are to see something more which the Underground Man, blinded by his egotism and isolation, cannot: that there is a *realistic and satisfying* alternative to the Crystal Palace conceived as chicken coop or tenement block, namely, the replacement of self-seeking with altruistic utopianism, and the establishment of a Christian brotherhood based on love. The moral is then that someone who is noble-minded enough to realize that "earthly bread" is not enough, such as the Underground Man, is not necessarily doomed to pointless rebellion against reality, so long as the Christian ideal of altruism and love can be recognized. The tragedy of the Underground Man, as we see illustrated in the Liza episode of Part II (to be considered further below), is that his entrenched egoism prevents him from recognizing this

⁴¹ Dostoevsky, 2001: 40f.

possibility: when Liza offers him her love selflessly and humbly, he is embarrassed, his vanity is wounded, and he is unable to reciprocate.⁴² The solution is obviously that the Underground Man should have abandoned his romantic ideals, which, though they have preserved him from lapsing complacently into Nihilist utopianism,⁴³ have spawned a host of unfulfillable and selfish needs and have prevented him from recognizing the Christian alternative. Thus it seems to me that Dostoevsky intended his Christian resolution to be deduced from the apparent deadlock reached between the romantic Underground Man and his utopian socialist interlocutors—that is, from the inadequacy of both of their utopian ideals, and the impossibility of moving beyond them without accepting Christianity as a viable alternative. As stated, I shall expand on these themes in Chapter 10.

* * *

Having considered the exegetical problems surrounding Chapter X, and clarified its congruity with stance of the romantic idealism prevalent in Chapter VI and elsewhere in the book, we are now in a position to elaborate on the way in which Chapter X exposes and explains the contradiction between the Underground Man's two ways of arguing against utopian socialism. As stated above, I believe that in Chapter X the Underground Man may be seen to explicitly disavow his Argument from Caprice; thankfully, however, he also provides something in the way of an explanation for this disavowal, which allows us to begin to make sense of his overall position. Beginning with exposition, we may note that the Underground Man opens Chapter X with the following remark:

You believe in the crystal palace [здание], eternally indestructible, that is, one at which you can never stick out your tongue furtively nor make a rude gesture, even with your fist hidden away. Well, perhaps I'm so

⁴² When Liza's disinterested love and concern provide him with an opportunity to loosen the reigns of his proud self-control, and give him an example of the way in which he must proceed, he only lapses back into sardonic detachment (Dostoevsky, 2001: 87).

⁴³ As Frank has noted (Frank, 1986: 345).

afraid of this building precisely because it's made of crystal and it's eternally indestructible, and because it won't be possible to stick one's tongue out even furtively.⁴⁴

To my mind, this is simply a continuation of the Argument from Caprice which preceded it: the Underground Man faults utopian socialism for the strictures it threatens to place on his previously avowed need to behave capriciously, to "stick his tongue out." Just as in Chapters VII, VIII and IX, he is "frightened" by the Crystal Palace because it represents the final institutionalization of rationality and utility, and the banishment of caprice. Immediately after this statement, however, he changes tack and begins the aesthetic critique of the Crystal Palace we considered above. The above-mentioned analogy of the chicken coop makes clear his aesthetic dissatisfaction with utopian socialism; in these passages the Underground Man reveals that he is simply too romantic and idealistic to respect the Crystal Palace as a utopia, even if it could satisfy all his needs. This about-face is not entirely unexpected: the Underground Man is simply returning to the mode of thought which he so abruptly abandoned in the transition between Chapters VI and VII.

At this point, indeed, his defence of caprice vanishes entirely. As Frank remarks in this connection, "Dostoevsky thus indicates that the underground man, far from rejecting all moral ideals in favour of an illimitable egoism, is desperately searching for one that would truly satisfy his spirit."⁴⁵ Frank does not see, however, that this fact alone seems to invalidate the preceding material of Chapters VII-IX—material which he considers central to the Underground Man's rejection of utopian socialism, and to be a direct expression of Dostoevsky's own opinions! From here, the Underground Man himself goes on to brush off his Argument from Caprice as an aberration, thus making the contradiction explicit:

Never mind that I myself have just rejected the crystal palace for the sole reason that it won't be possible to tease it by sticking out one's

⁴⁴ Dostoevsky, 2001: 25 (*PSS* 5: 120).

⁴⁵ Frank, 1986: 329.

tongue at it. I didn't say that because I'm so fond of sticking out my tongue.⁴⁶

In other words, despite the fact that he has just rejected utopian socialism because of its eradication of capricious behaviour, he doesn't really need or advocate capricious behaviour in general. He goes on:

Perhaps the only reason I got angry is that among all your buildings there's still not a single one where you don't feel compelled to stick out your tongue. On the contrary, I'd let my tongue be cut off out of sheer gratitude, if only things could be arranged that I'd no longer want to stick it out. What do I care if things can't be so arranged and if I must settle for some tenements?⁴⁷

Essentially, the Underground Man is incensed by the fact that no utopian ideal has yet been proposed—at least, no potentially realizable utopian ideal—which does not provoke a derisive reaction. This derision manifested in Chapters VII-IX as the Argument from Caprice, during which the Underground Man “got angry” and “rejected the crystal palace for the sole reason that it won't be possible to tease it by sticking out one's tongue at it.” From what the Underground Man says here, we can thus conclude that the whole argument was *itself* merely the manifestation of a capricious outburst—merely a way for the Underground Man to “stick out his tongue” at the utopian socialist ideal which provoked him, rather than a statement of his normal, essentially romantic views.

What is it about utopian socialism which provokes this reaction? We have seen that the libertarian interpretation, which points to the need for free will, is flawed as an explanation. Evidently, the Underground Man was motivated in part by the aesthetic inadequacy of the Crystal Palace *qua* chicken coop. On its own, however, this is not sufficient as an explanation either—the Argument from Caprice simply doesn't make sense as a response to such purely aesthetic considerations. Why would it lead him

⁴⁶ Dostoevsky, 2001: 26.

⁴⁷ Dostoevsky, 2001: 26.

to argue that caprice is the most advantageous advantage? As a devoted romantic, he would seem to have no reason to care about his supposed right to behave capriciously.

We may suppose that preceding material, Chapters I-VI, ought to have put us in a position to understand this phenomenon. We have already considered the contents of these chapters in broad outline: the Underground Man describes his heightened consciousness, his inertia, his spite, as well as some of their behavioural manifestations, including his refusal to be treated for his liver ailment, his inability to take revenge, his debauchery and the pleasure he derives from it, etc. etc. An explanation of these phenomena which can finally make sense of his misology is not yet forthcoming; this shall be the task of Chapters 6 and 7. In closing this chapter, we may simply recapitulate the progression of psychological themes surrounding the Argument from Caprice: in Chapter VI, the Underground Man begins thinking about the comfortable life he might have lived if he had cared to place his material needs above the requirements of his “heightened consciousness”; this leads him to reflect on the idea of “normal advantage” and the way in which he has spurned it for the sake of his romantic ideals; thus he is reminded of the fashionable theory that people *always* act in pursuit of their own advantage (rational egoism), and, in Chapter VII, begins to experience an urge—and this is where our explanation falters—to “stick his tongue out,” and to express this urge in the form of his Argument from Caprice, which is both a general defence of capriciousness and a capricious outburst in itself. When at the end of Chapter IX this outburst reaches its climax in a desperate panegyric on the inherent desirability of suffering and destruction, the Underground Man cools off and returns, in Chapter X, to a more level-headed rejection of the Crystal Palace from the standpoint of his romantic idealism.

7. Conclusion

With the goal of understanding the Underground Man's caprice, we were led in this chapter to investigate the psychological significance of his misology or opposition reason. As we have seen, the Underground Man's misology manifests in his rejection of "normal advantage." He attacks advantage from two different standpoints: on the basis of the aesthetic demands of his romantic idealism, and, in Chapters VII-IX, through the Argument from Caprice. Bearing in mind the context of *Notes from Underground* in Dostoevsky's polemical engagement with the utilitarian utopian socialists, scholars attempting to understand the Underground Man's opposition to advantage have naturally gravitated towards Chapters VII-IX, since it is here that he most directly engages with utopian socialist ideas. This has led to a skewed representation of his views, because, as we have also seen, these chapters are not characteristic of the work as a whole; the Underground Man even disavows them towards the end of Chapter X. Rather than spurning normal advantage out of sheer capriciousness, as Chapters VII-IX would in isolation suggest, he has in general deliberately and methodically sacrificed his interests for the sake of his romantic ideals. We have also further clarified the way in which his inertia is caused with reference to these ideals: being a romantic idealist and also a committed rationalist, his rational awareness of the impossibility of his most cherished ideals fuels his sceptical deliberation and Hamlet-like indecision; he prefers not to act at all than to act in a way that would offend his rationality by its impossible grandiosity, or offend his idealism by its banality.

Though this investigation of his romantic idealism has shed light on his inertia and his rejection of normal advantage in everyday life, it has not resolved the difficulty of understanding his attack on the Crystal Palace or his defence of caprice. Indeed, in light of his general commitment to romantic idealism, it is now more difficult than ever to make sense of the Underground Man's defence of caprice against utopian

socialism: why should a romantic idealist be capricious at all?⁴⁸ However, though we have not yet explained the Underground Man's misology or caprice, we have a new line of investigation to pursue. In Part 2, I shall proceed to consider in detail the relationship between the Underground Man's romantic idealism and his misology. Having done so, we shall finally be in a position to understand the nature and origin of his caprice, and its relevance to Dostoevsky's grand social-philosophical scheme in the *Notes*.

⁴⁸ According to Jones: "His rejection of mathematical models of reality is part of the very life-blood of Romanticism [...]. So too is his cult of passion and irrationalism: the revolt against Reason" (Jones, 1976: 60). Although romanticism is commonly associated with opposition to rationalism and nihilism, however, it is not usually associated with outright *caprice*, and the Underground Man's own romanticism—his dreams of Lake Como, of tragic heroism in imitation of Manfred or of Pushkin's Silvio—are plainly not misologicistic or capricious. Caprice is no less opposed to idealism than to nihilism.

Part 2

Chapter 6: Sturm und Drang

1. Introduction

In the last chapter, we saw how the Underground Man's caprice is bound to an attitude of misology, or hatred of reason, provoked in response to the humiliation of his romantic ideals by nihilism and utopian socialism. His romanticism causes him to become exasperated with his enemies, whose utopian proposals—which are, he grants, rational and thus realistic ideals—fall so far below anything that the Underground Man would consider to be a genuine ideal that he is prompted to “get angry” and “stick his tongue out” at them. This is the capricious reaction that he argues will inevitably follow as a consequence of utopian socialist doctrines. So far, however, the precise nature of the connection between the Underground Man's romantic idealism, his disappointment, and his capriciousness has remained a mystery. In order to understand the psychological basis of this reaction, which is key to understanding Dostoevsky's polemic against utopian socialism, we move on in this chapter to investigate the Underground Man's accusation of the “sublime and beautiful,” the aesthetic categories emblematic of his romantic idealism, as, in some unspecified sense, the source of his own caprice.

The basic structure of the chapter is as follows. First, I trace the Underground Man's claims to “heightened consciousness of the sublime and beautiful” to the works of Friedrich Schiller, and more generally to the *Sturm und Drang* literary movement to which Schiller contributed, and explain why this approach can be expected to shed light on Dostoevsky's novel. What we are trying to understand is the capricious

demand for unlimited freedom prompted by the frustration of romantic ideals by nihilism; we find that the *Sturm und Drang* movement is a clear precedent for this phenomenon, and, in combination with Schiller's later theoretical writings, will ultimately allow us to make sense of it. I then introduce concepts—beginning with the concept of the sublime—that are fundamental to the theoretical context from which the *Sturm und Drang* emerged. Although not all of the plays of the movement are overtly philosophical to the same extent as, say, Goethe's *Faust*, they nevertheless belong to a particular moment in the history of ideas and should be understood in reference to it. Finally, I then go on to address Schiller's play *The Robbers* with a view to illustrating some of the theoretical foundations laid in the preceding sections, and demonstrating the extent to which they are relevant to comprehending characters like those in Schiller's play, and the Underground Man, who is found to resemble them closely in crucial respects.

2. "The Sublime and Beautiful"

While scholars interested in Dostoevsky's social-philosophical polemic have, as we have seen, focused on the ideas of freedom and determinism in their interpretations of the psychological dimension of *Notes from Underground*, it seems to me that we should take seriously the Underground Man's explicit reference to his youthful appreciation of the "sublime and beautiful" as the catalyst for his current degraded condition. In the nineteenth century, this phrase became a cliché of romantic criticism; the Underground Man therefore uses it ironically, to mock the futility of his own former romantic idealism, which he now regards as naive and ridiculous. By the same token, however, the Underground Man is referring to a long tradition of literature, philosophy and criticism—the sentimentalism and romanticism prevalent during his youth, and the source of his own idealism. Frank notes that the Underground Man's allusions to this tradition tie him to existing Russian literary types, including

Turgenev's "superfluous men" and "Hamlets,"¹ who are also victims of overly enthusiastic romanticism and sentimentalism and also "destroyed by an excess of consciousness that unfits them for the possibilities offered by their lives."² However, Frank does not think this connection needs to be pursued in order to make sense of Dostoevsky's polemic:

Such thematic resemblances need not be denied; but this pervasive motive in Russian literature of the 1850s and 1860s is given special twist by Dostoevsky and shown as the unexpected consequence of the doctrines advanced by the very people who had attacked the "Hamlets" most violently—the radicals of the 1860s themselves.³

For Frank, the literary tradition merely provides Dostoevsky with a thematic platform for developing his critique of contemporary utopian socialism, rather than a substantive body of ideas. He does not take seriously the Underground Man's direct implication of the sublime and beautiful in the genesis of his anti-social condition, and prefers, as we have seen, to focus on the ideas of freedom and determinism, which seem to be more directly relevant to the social-philosophical dimension of the novel. I think Frank is right that Dostoevsky sought to saddle the Nihilists' doctrines with the "unexpected consequence" of the Hamlet type's debilitating psychological peculiarities. However, I think he is wrong to overlook Dostoevsky's insistent references to the sublime and beautiful, and the likelihood that he intends the Underground Man—and his attack on Chernyshevsky's utopian socialism—to be understood with reference to the body of thought and literature symbolized by this phrase—even if its polemical relevance is not immediately clear.

The sublime and the beautiful are concepts central to aesthetics; in the context of Dostoevsky's writings they point in particular to Friedrich Schiller, who wrote extensively on both concepts and, as I shall demonstrate below, gave them a psychological

¹ We shall consider some of these characters in Chapter 9.

² Frank, 1986: 319.

³ Frank, 1986: 319.

significance recognizable in Dostoevsky's fiction. Schiller is notable for having interwoven the aesthetics of beauty and sublimity into his ethics, psychology (or "anthropology" as it was then known) and social philosophy, thereby—as we shall see—setting the stage for Dostoevsky's own preoccupation with the interconnectedness of these domains.⁴ In general, Schiller was one of the most important influences on Russian intellectual culture during Dostoevsky's lifetime: he consistently appealed to young intellectuals dreaming of a utopian future for Russia, and his "enthusiasm for justice and freedom, for the good and the beautiful, for brotherhood and universal love" were a beacon to idealists, especially during the reactionary first decades of the nineteenth century.⁵ As such, he was seen as "the leader" of the intellectual figureheads and educators of the 1840s.⁶ As Dostoevsky himself put it: "Schiller undoubtedly got into the blood of Russian society."⁷ The extent of Dostoevsky's debt to Schiller is well known, though it is difficult to determine the nature of this debt precisely.⁸

In his fiction, Dostoevsky tends to use the name "Schiller" to refer to a psychological type based on the popular Russian stereotype of Schiller, rather than the man himself.⁹ This type is characterized by naive but obstinate idealism, as well as a tendency towards day-dreaming inactivity; it thus incorporates the "excess of consciousness" of the "Hamlet" type noted by Frank above.¹⁰ Dostoevsky's "Schillers" are typically confronted by antipodally world-wise antagonists, and forced to endure the

⁴ Schiller, 1993.

⁵ Kostka, 1965: 14. In this respect he was also highly influential on the *pochvenniki* (Chances, 1975: 164).

⁶ Kostka, 1965: 18.

⁷ Dostoevsky, 1964: 155.

⁸ See, e.g., Kostka, 1965, 1975: 101; Simons, 1967, 1972; Hart, 1971; Jones, 1974; Lyngstad, 1975; McReynolds, 2004; Meisel, 2016: 267-269.

⁹ Meisel, 2016: 268.

¹⁰ Charles Passage (1946) shows that, in Russia, Schiller was known in the early part of the nineteenth century predominantly for his *Sturm und Drang* plays and, thanks to the translations of Zhukovsky, his poetry. The Russian reception of Schiller during this period thus tended towards romanticism, at the expense of the more realistic works of Schiller's later classical period. This may account for the somewhat exaggerated stereotype of Schiller as a naive, ineffectual romantic idealist that emerges in Dostoevsky's "Schiller" characters.

humiliation of their lofty ideals.¹¹ He established this paradigm most explicitly in the confrontation between Vanya and Prince Valkovsky in *Humiliated and Insulted*; in *Crime and Punishment*, Raskolnikov fares no better at the hands of Porfiry and Svidrigailov, who mock his idealism and expose its shameful roots of pride and vanity.¹² Through confessing his youthful appreciation for the “sublime and beautiful,” the Underground Man identifies himself as a former “Schiller” of this kind. But it is far from easy to understand the precise significance of this “Schillerism” in *Notes from Underground*.

In what way might the Underground Man’s “Schillerism” be relevant for understanding his caprice? David McKinney has noted suggestively that the Underground Man’s appreciation of romantic aesthetics is directly linked to his craving for freedom: “The quintessence of the Underground Man’s ‘romantic’ nature is an impulsive demand for absolute freedom.”¹³ It remains to be seen, however, exactly why this might be the case. As stated, the characteristic fate of Dostoevsky’s “Schiller” type is painful disillusionment brought about by a humiliating confrontation with the sordid or unseemly aspects of reality. Such confrontations drive home the futility of the character’s idealism, and the unrealizability of his ideals.¹⁴ Thus Mochulsky sums up the

¹¹ Kostka (1965: 244) suggests that Dostoevsky himself experienced this kind of disillusionment in exile in Siberia, and was led thereby to renounce his own youthful “Schillerism.” We should note, however, that Dostoevsky was never uncritical of “Schillers,” even in his early fiction (see, for example, “White Nights” in Dostoevsky, 2010).

¹² Dostoevsky, 2003(b): 535-551, 555-576; 2012: 240-259. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, by contrast, Dmitry mocks his own “Schillerism,” which he struggles to maintain in the face of his own base desires: “I find it intolerable that there should be men, even those with the loftiest hearts and lofty intellects, too, who start out with the ideal of the Madonna and end up with the ideal of Sodom” (Dostoevsky, 2003(d): 145); Ivan Karamazov’s confrontation with the devil more neatly fits the paradigm of the mocked idealist (Dostoevsky, 2003(d): 811-831).

¹³ McKinney, 1978: 192.

¹⁴ Pierre Hart briefly explores Dostoevsky’s attempt to transpose Schiller’s treatments of medieval chivalry into nineteenth century Russia in his story “The Little Hero.” Hart notes that this attempt illustrates Dostoevsky’s early thinking on the psychological workings of idealistic “Schillerism” in the modern world, and establishes *naivety* and *futility* as essential components of “Schillerism.” He writes: “Dostoevskij’s solution to the problem of creating a credible representative of Schillerean idealism in ‘The Little Hero’ is a revealing one. By recasting him as a naive inexperienced youth, the author tacitly admitted the impossibility of sustaining such

Underground Man as a “disenchanted idealist.”¹⁵ And as Malcolm Jones writes: “personal ideals play a key role in Dostoyevsky’s psychology. The conflict between personal ideals of harmony, freedom, beauty, joy and justice, and a reality which seems to deny them all, is the primary source of the spiritual problems of Dostoyevsky’s heroes and heroines.”¹⁶ As I shall argue, it is indeed the disillusionment resulting from this conflict that is, in general terms, the psychological mechanism that explains the Underground Man’s caprice.¹⁷

That *Notes from Underground* is based on the theme of disillusioned “Schillerism” has been noted by various commentators. According to Rudolf Neuhauser, *Notes from Underground* is the culmination of Dostoevsky’s evolution “from an enthusiastic acceptance of German and French romantic models to an increasingly critical and sceptical attitude towards romantic and idealistic, ‘Schillerian’ literature.”¹⁸ Edmund Kostka, too, argues in his study of Schiller’s influence on Russian literature that *Notes from Underground* is the point at which Dostoevsky moves completely beyond his youthful devotion to Schiller: “full of fierce despair, [Dostoevsky] mercilessly demolishes the idols of his youth.”¹⁹ McKinney sees it as a parody of Russian “Schillerism.”²⁰ Richard Peace sees it as a direct attack, “permeated by a spirit of rejection.”²¹ Alexandra Lyngstad goes further still, and calls “Schillerism” the “ultimate target” of the novel:

Granted, Schillerism is not the only object of attack in this work; needless to say, it is combined with scientism, utilitarianism, and

attitudes in the adult world. Here then is the first suggestion of a condition that would prevail in the mature Dostoevskij’s works. It is for the young and inexperienced to maintain the Schillerian ideal of the good and the beautiful in the face of the world’s corruption” (Hart, 1971: 306f.).

¹⁵ Mochulsky, 1967: 256. Italics removed.

¹⁶ Jones, 1976: 51. See also Jones, 1974: 345.

¹⁷ Preben Villadsen (1981) has also attempted to explain the Underground Man’s character in terms of his acceptance of impossible romantic ideals, and the contrast between these ideals and reality; he does not go beyond such generalities, however.

¹⁸ Neuhauser, 1974: 333.

¹⁹ Kostka, 1965: 225. Cf. Shestov, 1969: 172.

²⁰ McKinney, 1978: 195.

²¹ Peace, 1971: 5.

utopianism. But it is a major strain. A leitmotif is the phrase “the sublime and the beautiful,” which occurs at least fifteen times. By its insistent presence, this phrase—which perhaps a bit too neatly sums up Schiller’s aesthetic idealism—does not allow the reader to forget the ultimate target of Dostoevskij’s satire.²²

Whilst I do not agree that Schiller is actually the *target* of *Notes from Underground*, I agree that Dostoevsky plays on broadly Schillerian ideas—and, perhaps, what he regards as the weaknesses of naive “Schillerism”—in his development of the underground psychology and in his attack on utopian socialism.

To repeat, Dostoevsky’s “Schillers” are not supposed to represent the real Schiller; nor does “Schillerism” refer with any degree of accuracy to his actual system of beliefs. Dostoevsky is drawing on the popular image of Schiller as an unwavering idealist, a champion of intellectual freedom and art, somewhat out of touch with reality, and optimistic about the prospects of humanity. When the Underground Man blames his condition on the sublime and beautiful, he is blaming it on his prior adherence to such “Schillerism” and his disillusionment with it. This led C. M. Woodhouse to conclude that Schiller’s influence on Dostoevsky was shallow and limited only to the vague connections of his name.²³ But there is reason to think that Dostoevsky is also alluding to the works of the real Schiller, and those of his contemporaries, not in order to attack them, but in order to draw upon them in service of his own polemical goals. As Malcolm Jones writes, “references and allusions to Schiller in Dostoyevsky are not just casual decoration, but have their roots in the psychological and ideological structure of Dostoyevsky’s novels.”²⁴

Jones himself provides some examples of how Schiller’s essay *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* sheds light on several of Dostoevsky’s characters (primarily in *The Adolescent*), but ultimately concludes that he borrowed haphazardly from Schiller in

²² Lyngstad, 1975: 25.

²³ Woodhouse, 1951: 19.

²⁴ Jones, 1974: 339.

accordance with “a fundamentally emotional principle of organisation.”²⁵ In focusing much more closely on *Notes from Underground* and several of Schiller’s works, delving further into the “psychological and ideological structure” of Dostoevsky’s novel, I find instead that Dostoevsky’s argument against Chernyshevsky builds on some of Schiller’s most sophisticated theories in a manner that withstands philosophical scrutiny. Whilst I am content to remain neutral on the question of whether and to what extent Dostoevsky consciously borrowed from Schiller, it seems to me extremely likely that, given his knowledge and appreciation of Schiller’s works, the congruence of their thought is not coincidental.

* * *

Pursuing this line of investigation, we find ample precedent for the Underground Man’s caprice and misology in the *Sturm und Drang* literature to which Schiller was a major contributor.²⁶ On reflection this is hardly surprising, since the *Sturm und Drang* is renowned precisely as a reaction against the rationalism of the Enlightenment, pitting destructive but idealistic heroes against the strictures of society, in much the same way as *Notes from Underground* pits the Underground Man against the utopian socialists. Thus not without reason has the Underground Man been called (if only in passing) “a hero directly from the *Sturm und Drang*.”²⁷ Of course, the resemblance is obscured by great differences in style and content—Schiller’s plays depict titanic heroes with stirring energy and passion; Dostoevsky, on the other hand, presents a sardonic former bureaucrat calculated to provoke revulsion and laughter. As we shall see in Chapters 9 and 10, such differences are highly significant in themselves. For present purposes, however, it is the similarities that are most interesting: the related themes of idealism, nihilism, disillusionment, and raging capricious protest against

²⁵ Jones, 1974: 354.

²⁶ I stated in Chapter 2 that there are no clear philosophical precedents for the Underground Man’s ideal of caprice—as it turns out, however, there are literary ones!

²⁷ McKinney, 1978: 194.

all constraints—regardless of whether this protest is warlike and righteous, or self-consciously petty and ridiculous.

Schiller's *Robbers*, which provided Dostoevsky with themes and inspiration throughout his career, is an important source of such ideas; another is Goethe's *Faust*, especially in its early forms. In both of these works, just as in *Notes from Underground*, idealistic characters behave capriciously in response to essentially nihilist doctrines—the disenchantment of reality by modern science and materialist philosophy—and, as I shall argue, do so for similar reasons.

Furthermore, I argue that in his later aesthetic essays Schiller has provided a body of theory which goes a long way towards describing a psychological mechanism that can explain the phenomenon of caprice illustrated in these works.²⁸ It is helpful for us to consider these theoretical and literary works side by side, for two reasons: firstly, because Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* is itself a hybrid of abstract theory and concrete illustration it invites comparison with both strands of Schiller's writings. Secondly, Schiller's theoretical works tend to be extremely abstract, while his plays are, of course, much more concrete in their depictions of psychological phenomena; as such, the two classes of writings form a complementary whole in which the abstractions of the one both *explain* and are *illustrated by* the concrete descriptions of the other.²⁹ Although Schiller's essays provide some important clues for making sense of the Underground Man's condition, these are somewhat tangential to his main theoretical concerns and he does not go into enough detail to make his psychological

²⁸ Lest it be thought improbable that Dostoevsky's fiction could have drawn directly on Schiller's theoretical works, it is worth noting that Dostoevsky was familiar with these essays, and not merely with Schiller's plays and poetry: "The exact times and places of his exposure to Schiller's philosophical texts are often difficult to establish, but they left identifiable traces on Dostoevsky's works. In the 1840s he dreamt of publishing a full edition of Schiller in Russian translation as a joint venture with his brother Mikhail. It never materialized, but with Fyodor's encouragement and involvement, Mikhail translated and published *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry*, in addition to several Schiller plays" (McReynolds, 2004: 365).

²⁹ Ernst Stahl (1954: 5-8) also noted that Schiller's early heroes can be read in terms of his later essays, and in particular his views on the difference between idealism and realism, to which I shall refer in due course.

views clear. So, although he provides no concrete illustrations of these views, which might serve to make their referents more tangible, we can easily supply our own from Schiller's plays and from those of his contemporaries, especially Goethe, to which he refers obliquely. His theoretical remarks thus become much more comprehensible, and their relevance to Dostoevsky's fiction clearer, when we read them in conjunction with the *Sturm und Drang* literary works to be considered later in this chapter and the next.

Having established, in Chapters 6 and 7, that the Underground Man's caprice can be illuminated by comparison with the *Sturm und Drang* and by Schiller's psychological theories, I proceed in Chapters 8 and 9 to justify this comparison further, and to explain why Dostoevsky should have recapitulated themes from the *Sturm und Drang* in particular when devising his polemic against utopian socialism, by way of surveying some of the literary and philosophical developments separating Dostoevsky's work conceptually and temporally from the *Sturm und Drang*.

3. *Sturm und Drang*

Just as the Underground Man reacts against the Nihilism of the 1860s, the *Sturm und Drang* movement was a reaction to the nihilism of the Enlightenment.³⁰ The character of its reaction is also much the same: it takes the form of a capricious demand for absolute freedom and independence. Its heroes typically see themselves as constantly oppressed and beleaguered by all manner of constraints, by the order of the world itself, which they struggle vainly to free themselves from.³¹ As in the case of *Notes from Underground*, this sense of oppression stems from the *idealism* of the hero, which is frustrated when its impossible demands are not fulfilled. Thus Lesley Sharpe

³⁰ As stated, I am using "Nihilism" to refer to the Russian school of thought including Chernyshevsky, Pisarev etc., and "nihilism" to refer to the more general philosophical position which they adopted, namely, extreme rationalism and reductive naturalism.

³¹ Hill, 2003(a): 32.

identifies the inability of Schiller's characters to *realize* their grand visions—the “gulf between the idealist's vision and the intractability of life”—as a constant preoccupation of his career.³²

It is customary to stress the political context of this phenomenon.³³ We shall however see that in *The Robbers* no less than in *Faust*, the characters feel constrained by their own human limitations, which they see in reductive, materialistic terms as a result of their Enlightenment scepticism, and not merely by the more concrete shackles of political despotism or social hierarchies. They are, like the Underground Man, idealists who have succumbed to disillusionment and become frustrated. With reference to his *Sturm und Drang* cohort, Goethe himself speaks of “the need for independence which arises in times of peace,” and notes that a “tender, sometimes morbid” longing for freedom arises precisely when our freedom is *least* threatened by external constraints: “in times of peace our love of freedom becomes more and more prominent, and the greater our freedom the more we wish for it; we will tolerate nothing above us; we will not be restrained; no one shall be restrained!”³⁴ Other commentators, therefore, stress the religious rather than the political context of the movement. According to Alan Leidner, for example:

The needs of these characters are deeper than even the grim German political situation can suggest, and classic works of the movement often contain an urge to extend oneself that seems more religious than political, as if the *Sturm und Drang* is expressing the needs of a place that has not yet had the same benefit of secularization as its eighteenth-century European neighbors.³⁵

We should also note, however, that the spiritual preoccupations of the movement, noted here by Leidner, can hardly be accounted for as products of pre-Enlightenment religiosity alone: the dubious benefits of secular Enlightenment philosophy are, in

³² Sharpe, 1991: 3.

³³ For a survey of politically-oriented scholarship, see Pugh, 2000: 144ff.

³⁴ Quoted in Lewes, 1908: 120f.

³⁵ Leidner, 2003: 277.

large measure, precisely what the *Stürmer und Dränger* were reacting against. Sharpe rightly notes that Schiller's early dramas "present the rootlessness of a generation that has inherited the Enlightenment's intellectual liberation from the constraints of tradition but cannot realize its vision of a better world."³⁶ This is a theme I shall return to.

Whatever its *cause*, however, it should here be noted that the dissatisfaction of the *Stürmer und Dränger* is not limited to any specific political, religious, or other state of affairs. As David Hill has remarked, the heroes of the movement are not ultimately striving towards, or away from, anything in particular: although in specific instances they may direct their rebellions against the religious, cultural or political status quo, the freedom they ultimately crave is nebulous and unspecified. This can be observed in the eponymous play of the *Sturm und Drang* movement, in F. M. Klinger's dissolute (and aptly named) hero Wild: "I want to have myself stretched over a drum so as to take on new dimensions. [...] Oh, if I could but exist in the barrel of this pistol until a hand blasted me into the air."³⁷ Such characters are, like the Underground Man after them, *capricious*—they have a yearning for absolute freedom and find constraints of any kind intolerable. The rebellion of the *Sturm und Drang* is thus, according to Hill,

an emotionally laden gesture expressing frustration, a desperate insistence on some undefined alternative to constriction: the *Sturm und Drang* is a kind of protest movement, impatient with everything that limits the possibilities of the individual, and "freedom" is the name used to refer to an imagined state in which there are no such limits.³⁸

Although Hill again mentions a political context for this frustration—the "political weakness of the middle class" at the time—it is the "desperate insistence on some undefined alternative to constriction," the hatred of constraints of every kind, that gives this movement its main relevance to *Notes from Underground*. Indeed, the resemblance of this frustrated attitude to that of the Underground Man could not be clearer.

³⁶ Sharpe, 1991: 1.

³⁷ Klinger, 1992: 127f.

³⁸ Hill, 2003(b): 160.

"The problematic nature of the idea of freedom does not," Hill adds, "detract from the intensity with which its absence was deplored: it is the energy and frustration of incoherent protest that fuelled the *Sturm und Drang*."³⁹

The demand for unlimited and unspecified freedom is precisely caprice of the kind advocated by the Underground Man. This demand, it seems to me, is peculiar to Dostoevsky's character and the *Stürmer und Dränger* that prefigure him. The lawless, unrefined agitation of the *Sturm und Drang* clashed with the emphasis soon to be placed—by the "Weimar classicism" of Goethe and, of course, Schiller himself, as well as romanticism and German Idealist philosophy—on harmony, balance and sagacity. However, though the kind of freedom emblematic of the *Sturm und Drang* had fallen out of favour long before Dostoevsky's day, it seems to have been well understood by nineteenth-century critics who commented on the early works of Goethe. One of the most perceptive of these was George Henry Lewes, one of Goethe's earliest biographers. (It may also be worth noting that Apollon Grigoryev—Dostoevsky's fellow *pochvennik*—regarded Lewes' *Life and Work of Goethe* as an example of the "organic criticism" he himself professed,⁴⁰ and thus, presumably, that Lewes was regarded as an important authority on Goethe by at least one person close to Dostoevsky at the time he was writing *Notes from Underground*.) Lewes refers to the *Sturm und Drang* as the "Werther epoch," after Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774),⁴¹ and sees the main characteristics of the movement encapsulated in the title character of this novel:

Werther is a man who, not having yet learned self-mastery, imagines that his immense desires are proofs of immense superiority [...]. He laughs at all rules [...]. He hates order [...]. In a word, he hates all control. [...] Very characteristic of the epoch is the boundless enthusiasm inspired by Ossian, whose rhetorical trash the Germans hailed as the finest expression of *Nature's* poetry. [...] It is abandonment of the mind, throwing the reins on the horse's neck, which makes such writing possible; and it was precisely this abandonment to impulse, this

³⁹ Hill, 2003(b): 165.

⁴⁰ Grigoryev, 1962: xxx.

⁴¹ Goethe, 1989.

disregard of the grave remonstrances of reason and good sense, which distinguished the Werther epoch.⁴²

The character described closely resembles the Underground Man, in both attitudes and development. The “rhetorical trash” of the Ossian poems⁴³ plays the same role here as the Underground Man’s favourite Romantic literature and his extravagant and disordered dreams “in the style of Manfred”: where the Underground Man indulges in delusions of grandeur, Werther turns for solace to these poems—written by James Macpherson, supposedly collected and translated from ancient bardic tradition—which represent the same abandonment of reality, rules and strictures. As his state of mind worsens, he ceases to read Homer and begins reading Ossian instead, thereby replacing the wholesome and youthful vigour of the Greeks with the (as Schiller says) “gloomy, formless, melancholy” world of northern sentimentalism.⁴⁴

This neglect of reality in favour of vague yearnings is characteristic of the *Sturm und Drang*, as is the harsh *disillusionment* that must accompany it. The inevitable concomitant is, as Lewes says, “throwing the reins on the horse’s neck”—*caprice*, since the “horse” here is the raw will and impulse of the hero himself. These are characters who strive to satisfy their desires even after they have been disillusioned by their struggles against unyielding realities. Their response to this disillusionment is one of defiance: they are ultimately doomed to failure, but they refuse to relinquish their ideals, and so exert all their powers in order to bend the world as far as possible to their will. Another Victorian critic highly sensitive to the *Sturm und Drang* psychology of caprice was Thomas Carlyle. (Grigoryev considered Carlyle’s work to be another example of “organic criticism,”⁴⁵ and even called him “the greatest of English thinkers”⁴⁶—despite his being Scottish—so, like Lewes, he was certainly known in Dostoevsky’s

⁴² Lewes, 1908: 154.

⁴³ Macpherson, 1996.

⁴⁴ Schiller, 1993: 221.

⁴⁵ Grigoryev, 1962: xxx. Victor Terras has noted that, in the style and content of his writing, Grigoryev can be considered the “Russian counterpart of Carlyle, with whose writings he was well familiar and whom he greatly admired” (Terras, 1974: 215; also Frank, 1986: 45).

⁴⁶ Grigoryev, 1962: 117.

circle, though never to my knowledge mentioned by Dostoevsky himself.) As Carlyle puts it in one of his essays on Goethe, the beleaguered spirit of the disillusioned idealist “lacerates itself, like a captive bird, against the iron limits which Necessity has drawn round it.”⁴⁷ In the defiance of caprice, such idealists attempt not only to surmount but to destroy every obstacle they encounter, knowing that they themselves will be destroyed in the process. This also leads them into conflict with reason and morality, the *internal* constraints on thought and activity that the Underground Man finds especially irksome. As Ronald Miller says: “From Werther’s point of view, ‘Vernunft’ (reason) and morality are principles that militate against his inner idealism, and they do so moreover in the interests of a world which, with its materialism, has shown itself to be so lacking in idealism.”⁴⁸

The movement from disillusionment to defiance and capriciousness is captured most brilliantly in J. M. R. Lenz’s short review of Goethe’s 1773 drama *Götz von Berlichingen*. Lenz, himself an important member of the *Sturm und Drang* movement, first laments the necessities of ordinary human life, from birth, through work and strife to death, all of which he regards as worthless. He thereby indicates the prevailing attitude of Enlightenment nihilism: such things are indeed worthless in light of the fact that they possess no higher meaning, they are vacuous; there is no God to reward honest toil in heaven, and the limits of human nature do not permit us to do anything genuinely worthy of respect here on earth. Lenz then rises to a panegyric on absolute freedom gained through sheer force of will, in the style of the play he is reviewing:

This is what we learn, that this our power of action should not rest, should not desist from effectiveness, from motion, from tumult until it has created freedom around us, room for action: good God, room for action, even if it were chaos you had created, wild and void, but freedom dwelled only there and we could brood over it in imitation of you until something emerged from it—bliss! bliss! a feeling fit for gods!⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Carlyle, 1908: 286.

⁴⁸ Miller, 1981: 62.

⁴⁹ In Chamberlain, 1992: 193.

Lenz's glorification of free activity for its own sake, with no thought of motivation or consequences—in other words, caprice—as a response to the banality of modern life finds expression throughout the *Sturm und Drang*. It is a response to a world in which his spiritual capacities have first been aroused by the “sublime and beautiful” heights of sentiment, and then jilted by the boring universe of the sceptical Enlightenment. Götz von Berlichingen himself embodies this disillusionment in the specific domain of politics, in the transition between the age of largely independent feudal knights and the age of the centralized modern state.⁵⁰ His ideal is a life of heroism and chivalry, but he is confronted by underhanded political and legal machinations, which he despises but which he is ultimately unable to overcome.⁵¹ The life he thinks worth living is no longer liveable. Mark Kistler's description of Götz is very apt:

He perishes of complete frustration in a world which does not understand him, hurts him at every turn, and will not allow him to be himself. In his desire to break with all social conventions and live according to the dictates of his own heart, he sees, alas, *the gulf between the real and the ideal become wider and wider*, until he has to turn away in anger and disgust from *a world which will not submit to his desires*.⁵²

The immodesty of the hero's demand for the whole world to capitulate to *his* will, so that he needn't capitulate to *its* natural necessity, is characteristic of the *Sturm und Drang* in general. It represents a confrontational, inflexible idealism which will settle for nothing less than realization of the ideal itself, and would rather go to complete ruin than adopt a more pragmatic attitude. And because their ideals are unrealistic, its heroes inevitably do go to ruin. As Ronald Miller writes of Werther, whose disillusionment famously ends in suicide: “any tendency to compromise with the world [...] he could only regard as a betrayal of his idealism.”⁵³

⁵⁰ Goethe, 1988: 1-82.

⁵¹ Goethe, 1988: 82.

⁵² Kistler, 1969: 27. Italics added.

⁵³ Miller, 1981: 62.

Statements quoted so far should indicate the extent to which *Notes from Underground* recapitulates the characteristics of *Sturm und Drang* heroes like Werther and Götz von Berlichingen. What we are trying to understand is the causal relation between the Underground Man's romantic idealism, nihilistic disillusionment and caprice. We have seen that the *Sturm und Drang* movement sets a clear precedent for this relation. As we shall see more fully in what follows, it is thus highly instructive to compare *Notes from Underground* with these works: to situate Dostoevsky's highly enigmatic and apparently paradoxical novel with reference to a well-known and rather more transparent literary tradition is to open it up to scrutiny. Such comparisons ultimately reveal how consistently Dostoevsky was building on the works of writers like Goethe and Schiller in developing the *Notes*, and that he did so not merely in order to develop isolated themes or allusions, but his whole polemic against Chernyshevsky. He could have expected his readers to recognize his engagement with this tradition immediately – after all, Schiller in particular “got into the blood of Russian society,”⁵⁴ and Goethe was hardly less influential⁵⁵ – and to understand his work in this context.

In the remainder of this chapter, I shall examine the conceptual foundations of the *Sturm und Drang* movement, and one of its most famous and influential works, Schiller's *Robbers*, which encapsulate clearly and concisely the ideas I wish to emphasize in relation to *Notes from Underground*. In Chapter 7, I shall then consider how Schiller's theoretical essays shed light on the phenomenon of caprice, using Goethe's *Faust* as an illustration, before returning to apply what we have learned from the *Sturm und Drang* to the interpretation of Dostoevsky's novel.

⁵⁴ Dostoevsky, 1964: 155.

⁵⁵ See, e.g., Von Gronicka, 1985.

4. The Sublime and Human Dignity

We begin with the concept of the sublime. For philosophers after Kant, sublimity was the aesthetic character pertaining to things which make us aware of our spiritual superiority over nature.⁵⁶ A raging sea, for instance, is a power capable of destroying our bodies and our possessions, or causing us to act foolishly out of fear; but (so long as we are not actually threatened by it) by observing it we can come to sense that no matter how powerful it is, there is something in us that it cannot destroy (namely, the soul). We feel that our true personhood is completely independent of our fragile bodies and wayward passions. Sublime objects provide an occasion for this realization precisely because they encourage us—as Isaiah Berlin says—to “retreat to the inner citadel,”⁵⁷ and discover that it is far better protected than we might otherwise have assumed. As Schiller writes:

We call an object sublime if, whenever the object is presented or represented, our sensuous nature feels its limits, but our rational nature feels its superiority, its freedom from limits. Thus, we come up short against a sublime object physically, but we elevate ourselves above it morally, namely, though ideas.⁵⁸

And as he says elsewhere:

Thus, by means of the feeling of the sublime, we experience that the state of mind is not necessarily oriented to the state of our senses, that the laws of nature are not necessarily our laws as well, and that we have within us a self-sufficient principle that is independent of all sensuous stirrings.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ For a general history of the idea of the sublime in aesthetics, see Kirwan, 2005. Before Schiller, the most important theorists of the sublime were Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant (Burke, 2015; Kant, 1987, 2007). Vanessa Ryan has argued against the tendency of scholars to assume that Burke and other thinkers *before* Kant were also concerned with the spiritually uplifting qualities of the sublime (Ryan, 2001).

⁵⁷ Berlin, 2002: 181-187.

⁵⁸ Schiller, 1993: 22.

⁵⁹ Schiller, 1993: 74.

The spiritual ascendancy over nature that sublime objects reveal to us gives us a feeling of absolute freedom, because in our mental capacities we really are unlimited—we can imagine anything we want to imagine, or think anything we want to think, irrespective of whether what we imagine and think is true or can come true in reality.⁶⁰ This capacity cannot be diminished by any external constraints; our minds are free even when our bodies are imprisoned. Of course, Schiller is operating with a Christian-Platonic conception of the spirit or soul, which is why the independence of the mental powers of imagination and intellect from external constraints is also taken as evidence for the complete independence of the spirit or soul from the body.⁶¹ Thus, sublime experiences reveal to us that even if the body is destroyed utterly, the absolute independence of the spirit will ensure that it remains safe and free.⁶²

It is worth noting here that the word “sublime” is ambiguous, for it refers not only to the aesthetic character of sublime objects, but also to that aspect of ourselves which such objects reveal to us: thus human beings are themselves “sublime” insofar as they are elevated above nature; and we can say that sublime objects make us aware of our own sublimity as spiritual beings.⁶³ It is also worth noting that for Schiller, as for Plato and Kant, human sublimity is human rationality: it is through reason that we ascend from the confines of the “sensory realm” to the freedom of the “realm of ideas,” and by virtue of our rationality that we belong in spirit to the latter. Reason is here understood as a kind of spiritual principle or, in some sense, the “soul,” and not merely as

⁶⁰ “Everything existing has its limitations, but thought is unbounded” (Schiller, 1993: 234).

⁶¹ As Kirwan writes of eighteenth-century thinkers in general: “To all but the most thoroughgoing atheist, there was also some objective correlative for the feeling inspired [by the sublime], so that merely in itself that feeling need not be delusional” (Kirwan, 2005: 37).

⁶² Cf. the famous statement in Pascal’s *Pensées*, no. 231: “A human being is only a reed, the weakest in nature, but he is a thinking reed. To crush him, the whole universe does not have to arm itself. A mist, a drop of water, is enough to kill him. But if the universe were to crush the reed, the man would be nobler than his killer, since he knows that he is dying, and that the universe has the advantage over him. The universe knows nothing about this” (Pascal, 1995: 72f.).

⁶³ Indeed, “eighteenth-century thinkers move away from understanding the sublime as a set of qualities that are presumed to be internal to a given object, and shift their attention to the mental effects of those objects” (Ryan, 2001: 265).

an intellectual capacity or faculty. The association of sublimity and rationality is important, because it leads us to another of Schiller's theoretical claims.

In his most important theoretical work, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (known as the *Aesthetic Letters*, published 1794), Schiller writes that when human beings first become aware of their rationality — of their sublimity — they also become aware of a need to know what he calls the “absolute” or the “unconditioned,” which reason inherently demands as the end result of its striving for pure and adequate knowledge. Schiller calls this need the “form drive.” As a result, they are encouraged to abstract from real life, which is always “conditioned” by contingent physical facts, and which they can only *sense* passively; they must seek the absolute through intellect and imagination, which are not passively fettered to such contingencies, but are completely free: “This demand, since it can never be wholly satisfied in any single condition of his physical life, forces [man] to leave the physical altogether, and ascend out of limited reality into the realm of ideas.”⁶⁴ Man's reason strives to “wrest him from the bondage of time, and lead him upwards from the sensuous world towards the ideal world.”⁶⁵

Schiller is here building on what are ultimately Platonic themes. Through his famous allegory of the cave, Plato illustrates the idea that in ordinary life people are trapped within the “cave” of sensory experience, through which we have no direct access to the ultimate truths of reality, but only a faint, second-hand approximation.⁶⁶ Schiller follows this Platonic notion in thinking that reason gives rise to and potentially, through philosophy, satisfies the need to transcend the limited perspective of our physical human nature and grasp the ideal “forms” and the “absolute” which conditions them. The “absolute” itself is an obscure notion in Schiller, as in Plato: it is simply the highest reward of philosophy and mastery of the ideal world. As his colleague Fichte also remarked: “mankind has an innate desire to catch a glimpse of that

⁶⁴ Schiller, 1993: 158.

⁶⁵ Schiller, 1993: 158.

⁶⁶ *Republic*, 514a–520a (Plato, 1997: 1132–1137).

realm which transcends the individual—to view this realm, not merely in a reflected light, but directly.”⁶⁷

Schiller is also building on Kant’s idea of the “needs of reason,” which include the need to know about the existence of God, of free will, and of immortality.⁶⁸ They are called needs of *reason* because reason is what gives birth to them: it is through cultivating our rationality, through thinking beyond our limited animal circumstances, that we discover ideals of perfection we cannot help but strive to realize. And they are called *needs* of reason because they necessarily compel all rational beings to pursue their satisfaction: they concern the most important and consequential ideas we are capable of framing, the “most important vistas” of the mind.⁶⁹ I shall generally use the more general term *spiritual needs* in what follows (without implying by “spiritual” that these needs are always religious), since “needs of reason” may seem to imply that the needs are narrowly intellectual, which, if by “intellectual” we understand a cold and disinterested curiosity, is certainly not the case.

According to Schiller, reason lifts us above the world of sense, and gives us a feeling for our own sublimity. As we have seen, it thereby makes us unsatisfied with the world of sense, in which we are shackled by our weak human bodies, buffeted by our tempestuous emotions and sensual desires, and limited by our finite human senses. Reason thus inculcates in us a feeling that there must be something beyond the world of sense, if human existence is not to be a complete farce, that would anchor us to a higher spiritual world if only we could comprehend it. Our spiritual needs or the needs of reason, then, boil down to the overarching need to transcend, in some meaningful way, the limitations of the world of sense, in which we are merely clever animals and lack any grounds for thinking that we are uniquely privileged as spiritual beings. We need confirmation of our *sublimity*, and, since we cannot find this in the world of sense, we must look for it in the realm of ideas. We thereby discover *ideals*

⁶⁷ Fichte, 1988: 412.

⁶⁸ *Critique of Pure Reason*, B21 (Kant, 1996: 60f.).

⁶⁹ Kant, 2002: 55n.

that, if realized, would vindicate our absolute intellectual freedom and confirm our sense of human dignity. For Schiller, the needs of reason concern knowledge of the unspecifiable “absolute,” and of—in Kantian terms—the “Ideas of reason,” e.g., God, freedom and immortality.⁷⁰ To fully satisfy these needs would in this case be to realize the ideal of obtaining knowledge of the existence of these things; to know that they exist is to have confirmation of humanity’s supernatural origin and vocation.

More generally, however, I shall say that to satisfy our spiritual needs would be to *realize* the *ideals* which we discover, in using our absolute freedom in the realm of ideas, at the behest of these needs. Evidently, ideals come in different forms, and the forms they come in determine the conditions under which we can say that they have been realized; the ideal of knowing the existence of God is one example. We can also think of other examples: the chivalry of Don Quixote or the romanticism of the Underground Man. These too are ideals, or bundles of ideals, which are discovered through the exercise of mental freedom in abstraction from merely “animal” concerns, in cognizance of the sublimity of the human spirit. To be a chivalrous knight or a romantic hero is to pursue the realization of ideals, such as noble self-sacrifice or Promethean defiance of injustice, that could not occur to a person who had not, in Schiller’s terms, begun to leave animality behind, “leave the physical altogether, and ascend out of limited reality into the realm of ideas.”⁷¹ These ideals, unlike the knowledge of Kant’s Ideas of reason, involve activities other than simply knowing the existence of something or other; they involve real physical actions and events. To realize them is therefore to actually do something in the world—to challenge Zverkov to a duel, for example. But they serve the same fundamental need as Kant’s need to know the existence of God, or Schiller’s need to know the Absolute. In general, to satisfy one’s spiritual needs is to realize the ideals discovered through sublime abstraction from nature and thereby to find the longed-for confirmation of human dignity.

⁷⁰ *Critique of Pure Reason*, A669/B697 (Kant, 1996: 638).

⁷¹ Schiller, 1993: 158.

5. Nihilism in the Enlightenment

The eighteenth century had a complicated relationship with human dignity. Considered as a deliberate project, the Enlightenment is typically associated with French *philosophes* like Diderot, Voltaire and d’Alambert, and their *Encyclopédie* (1751-1772), which was envisioned as a compendium of all useful information for the progress of science and morals.⁷² In general the *philosophes* used satire and philosophical criticism to attack traditional cultural forms that they considered irrational and outdated, and appealed to science as a source of new, more rational kinds of society, politics, religion and economics. In both of these negative and positive aspects of their project, the philosophers of the Enlightenment can be regarded as antagonistic to the traditional notion of human dignity as sublimity; an old-school idealist like Götz could approve neither their rejection of traditional values, nor their attempts to create new rationally sanctioned values. In this section I shall outline this dimension of Enlightenment philosophy in order to clarify what exactly the *Stürmer und Dränger* were reacting against, and why.

Sweeping rational criticism had been associated with philosophy since Descartes, who famously subjected himself to a method of doubt designed to ensure that he did not have any unreasonable beliefs.⁷³ During the Enlightenment, this kind of critique was directed against all aspects of human life, often in opposition to church and state, in a manner foreign to Descartes—who merely wanted to ensure that his existing religious and metaphysical beliefs had a secure rational foundation. Thus, according to Diderot, the project of the Encyclopaedia requires a strident intellectual courage; nothing is to be exempt from rational criticism, no matter how venerable or well-loved; tradition has no scientific value and can thus be disregarded. “Now,” he says, “in our own age, we must trample mercilessly upon all these ancient puerilities,

⁷² Diderot, 1999: xi.

⁷³ Descartes, 1998: 3ff.

overturn the barriers that reason never erected, give back to the arts and sciences the liberty that is so precious to them.”⁷⁴

The philosophers of the Enlightenment tended to assume, almost on faith, that reason was an unalloyed good that could not possibly bring anything other than benefit to humanity.⁷⁵ D’Holbach makes several statements to this effect: “The wicked are never more than men who are either drunk or mad”⁷⁶ — “The source of man’s unhappiness is his ignorance of nature”⁷⁷ — “Truth is invariable—it is requisite to man—it can never harm him.”⁷⁸ Knowledge is virtually equated with both happiness and virtue; it not only liberates us from the injustice of traditional authorities, it supplies a new, just authority to take their place. This is also evident in a pithy and highly characteristic remark from d’Alambert’s *Preliminary Discourse to the Encyclopaedia*: “liberty requires only enlightenment to preserve itself from excess.”⁷⁹

That this view survived the Reign of Terror, which was partly inspired by and popularly conceived as a direct result of the *philosophes’* ideas, testifies to its central importance in the project of Enlightenment and progress. Condorcet would echo it in his 1795 *Esquisse* — “the most influential and arguably the most powerful formulation of the idea of progress”⁸⁰ — despite the fact that this was written in hiding from the revolutionary authorities. Science *always* makes us happier and better, he asserts; if the progress of civilization has not always improved us, he adds almost parenthetically, this is not because of the progress of knowledge itself but because of the “prejudice and error” that has polluted it.⁸¹ What is called for, then, is not restraint or caution but merely a more ruthlessly scientific kind of progress. Enlightenment philosophy has already had an impact on the masses and made the judgements of reason

⁷⁴ Diderot, 1956: 298.

⁷⁵ Berlin, 1999: 26-31.

⁷⁶ D’Holbach, 1999: 143.

⁷⁷ D’Holbach, 1999: 3.

⁷⁸ D’Holbach, 1999: 4.

⁷⁹ D’Alambert, 1995: 62.

⁸⁰ Condorcet, 2012: xl.

⁸¹ Condorcet, 2012: 16.

into public property: each individual now feels it is his right to “submit all opinions to his own reason”; this liberation is a precious achievement.⁸² Indeed, he thinks, the most important benefit of all science is not its immediate technical usefulness, but rather its influence on culture at large: “All errors in politics and morals are based on philosophical errors and these in turn are connected with scientific errors. There is not a religious system nor a supernatural extravagance that is not founded on ignorance of the laws of nature.”⁸³ Scientific progress was thus the key to human happiness; and if the optimism of the *philosophes* had blinded them to the possibility of a bloody revolution inspired by their ideas, this was not the fault of the *philosophes* or their ideas but of the half-hearted and inconsistent attempt of society at large to assimilate them.

This confidence in the power and beneficence of reason exacerbated an existing problem in European intellectual culture, namely, the problem of making sense of humanity’s place in the universe, or, as I have called it, the problem of human dignity. In this connection, the Enlightenment’s rationalism played two contradictory roles. On the one hand, reason allows humanity to understand nature scientifically, including human nature and its relationships with other aspects of the physical universe. It allows us to see from the naturalist’s perspective that we are merely a species of animals, more intelligent than most, but physically weaker to compensate. On the other hand, and precisely because reason allows us to understand the natural world in this way, it sets us apart from—and above—the other animals, who are merely passive components of the physical world, and cannot master it, as we can, through intellect and imagination.⁸⁴ As Pascal wrote: “Through space the universe grasps and engulfs me like a pinpoint; through thought I can grasp it.”⁸⁵

⁸² Condorcet, 2012: 98.

⁸³ Condorcet, 2012: 118.

⁸⁴ E.g. Diderot, 1956: 292f.

⁸⁵ Pascal, 1995: 36 (no. 145).

This double nature of human beings—“an odd mixture of sublime talents and shameful weakness”⁸⁶—had always been a concern for philosophers, but it acquired a new and more urgent fascination after the Renaissance, and especially during the Enlightenment, when rapid progress in natural science exposed the duality of reason and nature ever more starkly. Manfred Kuehn appropriately ends his biography of Kant with a quote from the *Essay on Man* of Alexander Pope—Kant’s “favourite author”—which famously sums up this predicament:

In doubt to deem himself a god, or beast;
 In doubt his mind or body to prefer;
 Born but to die, and reas’ning but to err;
 Alike in ignorance, his reason such,
 Whether he thinks too little, or too much:
 Chaos of thought and passion, all confus’d;
 Still by himself abus’d, or disabus’d;
 Created half to rise, and half to fall;
 Great lord of all things, yet a prey to all;
 Sole judge of truth, in endless error hurl’d:
 The glory, jest, and riddle of the world!⁸⁷

Such sentiments were prevalent during the eighteenth century because, through science, it became increasingly apparent just how similar humans are to the other animals, in every aspect except their rationality; and, by the same token, philosophers discovered just how far their rationality elevates them above the animals—above their own animality—precisely because it became so scientifically powerful. This prompted the “doubt to deem himself a god, or beast” from which the question of human dignity becomes a serious problem. And it is from this that the spiritual needs, which demand transcendence over nature, acquire their special urgency. If we are the “jest” of the world—featherless bipeds with delusions of grandeur—how can we be

⁸⁶ Diderot, 1956: 297. Cf. Pascal’s *Pensées*, no. 164: “What a figment of the imagination human beings are! What a novelty, what monsters! Chaotic, contradictory, prodigious. Judging everything, mindless worm of the earth, storehouse of truth, cesspool of uncertainty and error, glory and reject of the universe” (Pascal, 1995: 41).

⁸⁷ Kuehn, 2009: 422. *Essay on Man*, II.I.8-18 (Pope, 2006: 281).

its “glory”? The answer to this question was complicated by scepticism about traditional metaphysics.

There had always been more-or-less overt sceptical tendencies in Enlightenment philosophy, simply because in general it viewed reason as the final arbiter of belief, and because many Enlightenment philosophers took natural science as the paradigm of rational justification. Because metaphysical beliefs—including many religious beliefs—are difficult or impossible to justify in the same way as scientific beliefs, the elevation of reason to this position of epistemic authority immediately raised the problem of scepticism about religious and other super-natural notions traditionally accounted valuable. This was extremely troubling for many philosophers. One of the most famous statements of the anxiety and depression provoked by such scepticism was published by the most important sceptical philosopher of the Enlightenment, David Hume, in his *Treatise on Human Nature* (1738-1740):

[T]hat reflections very refin'd and metaphysical have little or no influence upon us? This opinion I can scarce forbear retracting, and condemning from my present feeling and experience. The *intense* view of these manifold contradictions and imperfections in human reason has so wrought upon me, and heated my brain, that I am ready to reject all belief and reasoning, and can look upon no opinion even as more probable or likely than another. Where am I, or what? From what causes do I derive my existence, and to what condition shall I return? Whose favour shall I court, and whose anger must I dread? What beings surround me? and on whom have I any influence, or who have any influence on me? I am confounded with all these questions, and begin to fancy myself in the most deplorable condition imaginable, environ'd with the deepest darkness, and utterly depriv'd of the use of every member and faculty.⁸⁸

⁸⁸ Hume, 1969: 316. Interestingly, the chapter of Hume's *Treatise* in which this statement occurs, the Conclusion of Book I, was translated into German by the influential *Sturm und Drang* thinker Johann Georg Hamann as *Nachtgedanken eines Skeptikers* (Night Thoughts of a Sceptic, after Edward Young's *Night Thoughts*) in 1771; it thus added considerable impetus to the problem of nihilism against which writers like Schiller and Goethe would respond in their plays (Kuehn, 2009: 198).

Hume found that “nature herself” inevitably rescued him from episodes of this malaise, and that, once distracted by some business or amusement, he was content to allow these problems to remain unsolved.⁸⁹ Other philosophers were not so willing to acquiesce in ignorance, or to defer the resolution of their metaphysical questions indefinitely.⁹⁰ Hume’s sceptical philosophy thus gave new prominence to the old dilemma: “either a rational skepticism or an irrational leap of faith.”⁹¹ The notion of reality which stems from choosing reason over faith, and embracing this kind of scepticism, can be called reductive naturalism or nihilism, meaning the belief in nothing beyond what is amenable to scientific investigation.

Some Enlightenment philosophers actively supported this kind of nihilism. Perhaps the most deliberately nihilistic philosopher of the French Enlightenment was the Baron d’Holbach. In his *System of Nature* (1770), d’Holbach explicitly denies the existence of free will and rails against attempts to set human beings apart from the rest of the universe; such pretensions were, to his mind, dangerous diversions from the true path to happiness.⁹² This, he councils, involves a reconciliation with *nature* and the teachings of natural science which, though they may seem harsh to the unenlightened, promise to realign humanity with the grand scheme of life on earth. Thus d’Holbach openly rejects the traditional notion of human dignity *qua* sublimity—for him, there is nothing about humans that is different in kind, rather than degree, from any other

⁸⁹ “I dine, I play a game of backgammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends; and when after three or four hours’ amusement, I would return to these speculations, they appear so cold, and strained, and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any farther” (Hume, 1969: 316).

⁹⁰ This was especially true in Germany, as we shall see in Chapter 8. Kant admired Hume for revealing the weakness of the human intellect and attempting to put an end to the futile disputes of metaphysics, but chastised him for failing to provide a stable rational basis for morality or, therefore, for human dignity: “[Hume] meanwhile lost sight of the positive harm that results if reason is deprived of the most important vistas, from which alone it can stake out for the will the highest goal of all the will’s endeavors” (Kant, 2002: 55n).

⁹¹ Beiser, 1987: 3.

⁹² “At length human vanity accommodated itself to a hypothesis which, unquestionably, appears to distinguish man from all other physical beings, by assigning to him the special privilege of a total independence of all other causes, but of which a very little reflection would have shown him the impossibility” (D’Holbach, 1999: 135).

physical object. What's more, he denies that human dignity in this sense should be regarded as important in the first place. It is worth quoting d'Holbach at length, since in the following statement he fully encapsulates the nihilistic strain of Enlightenment thought:

Let it not then be said, that it is degrading man to reduce his functions to a pure mechanism; that it is shamefully to undervalue him, to compare him to a tree—to an abject vegetation. The philosopher devoid of prejudice, does not understand this language invented by those who are ignorant of what constitutes the true dignity of man. A tree is an object which, in its station, joins the useful with the agreeable; it merits our approbation when it produces sweet and pleasant fruit, and when it affords a favourable shade. All machines are precious, whenever they are truly useful, and when they faithfully perform the functions for which they are designed. Yes, I speak it with courage, the honest man, when he has talents and possesses virtue, is, for the beings of his species, a tree that furnishes them with delicious fruit, and affords them refreshing shelter: the honest man is a machine, of which the springs are adapted to fulfil its functions in a manner that must gratify the expectation of all his fellows. No, I should not blush to be a machine of this sort; and my heart would leap with joy if I could foresee that the fruit of my reflections would one day be useful and consoling to my fellow man.⁹³

The enormous significance of d'Holbach's position emerges when we consider that it is the complete denial of *sublimity*, and thus, as he recognizes quite explicitly, of *human dignity* traditionally conceived; he rejects the value of spiritual transcendence as well as its reality, rejects the "spiritual needs" of humanity as a contrivance, and would regard Schiller's Kantian theory of the sublime as a useless fantasy. "Man is the work of Nature: he exists in Nature: he is submitted to her laws: he cannot deliver himself from them; nor can he step beyond them even in thought. In vain his mind would spring forward beyond the visible world, an imperious necessity always compels his return."⁹⁴ D'Holbach's position is, as such, complete nihilism. In this he

⁹³ D'Holbach, 1999: 172.

⁹⁴ D'Holbach, 1999: 7.

follows the even more notorious Julien de La Mettrie, whose witty and scientifically informed comparisons between humans, machines, animals and plants were directed squarely against the idea of human dignity: “there is no animal so paltry and vile,” he says in *L’Homme plante* (1748), “whose examination does not diminish the philosopher’s pride in himself.”⁹⁵

Nihilism of this kind was perceived by many to be an imminent danger throughout and after the Enlightenment, but especially towards the end of the eighteenth century.⁹⁶ The risk it posed can be understood, in light of what was said above, as a problem of human dignity, that is, of what makes human beings special in comparison to animals and the rest of nature. Traditionally, religion had served to guarantee this special status. And even as religion lost credence among many progressive intellectuals, essentially religious notions—such as immortality and the idea of an omnipotent dispenser of justice—were retained to fulfil this indispensable function. As Karl Ameriks writes,

Enlightenment philosophers tended no longer to see any need to insist on the miraculous doctrines of Christian “special revelation,” but for a long time they continued to assert that rational philosophy and “natural teleology” point toward at least the likelihood of a God who provides a meaningful existence and final end for human individuals.⁹⁷

As the Enlightenment progressed, however, the philosophical credentials of these substitutes for revelation were more often called into question as well.⁹⁸ D’Holbach, as we have seen, explicitly rejected God and religion. So, although the Enlightenment elevated the place of humans *within* the natural world through the prospect of a scientific conquest of nature and a rational reordering of human affairs, it also, and by the same token, undermined the traditional sources of human dignity and superiority

⁹⁵ La Mettrie, 1994: 89.

⁹⁶ Beiser, 1987: 126.

⁹⁷ In Reinhold, 2005: xviii.

⁹⁸ Beiser, 1987: 1–4. Of course, the relationship between religion and Enlightenment was always complex. For a consideration of affinities between the two, see, e.g., Mortimer, 2016.

over this world, namely, Platonic and Christian metaphysics and religion, through subjecting them to the same standards of rational inquiry as natural science. Again, the situation can be illustrated by means of Plato's analogy of the cave: science promised to equip the cave with every imaginable comfort and convenience, but at the cost of sealing the entrance forever. Not only the defenders of religious orthodoxy, but also many who embraced the Enlightenment ideal of progress away from orthodoxy, were unhappy with this situation; both were heavily invested in the Christian-Platonic conception of human dignity as sublime transcendence over nature, and were far less willing than d'Holbach to embrace the alternative ideal of the tree, the "object which, in its station, joins the useful with the agreeable." Thus "while most writers knew that orthodox religion was intellectually bankrupt, its emotional hold was not so easily shaken off."⁹⁹ This led to the condemnation of traditional philosophy and science by the philosopher Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, who was responsible for popularizing the word "nihilism" as a label for the sceptical consequences of Enlightenment philosophy. Jacobi's challenge to the Enlightenment set the tone of German philosophy at the end of the eighteenth century.¹⁰⁰ If the development of rational philosophy led inevitably to nihilism, Jacobi wrote,

reason would be an asset to man only to the extent that it remains in its childhood, *and gets along with delusion and deception*. As it grows up and makes progress towards perfection, death simple and pure develops from it. This death is called science and truth, and these mean victory over everything that uplifts man's heart and gives bliss to it; what transfigures his countenance, directs his eye upwards—the victory over everything great, sublime, and beautiful.¹⁰¹

The Underground Man's romantic distaste for rationalism here finds its precedent. And yet, in spite of the cost to human dignity, it seemed to many that nothing could or even *should* be done to halt the advance of rational science and philosophy; after

⁹⁹ Hilliard, 2011: 17.

¹⁰⁰ Beiser, 1987: 4.

¹⁰¹ Jacobi, 2009: 523.

all, reason is reason and the truth is the truth. The pronouncements of reason must be heeded even if they contradict “everything that uplifts man’s heart and gives bliss to it.” As Thomas Carlyle later saw it, many people could continue to flourish by restricting themselves to practical matters, but those afflicted with the “malady of Thought” could not¹⁰²—like the “hyperconscious” Underground Man, who denigrates the “men of action” too limited or too dishonest to face the unavoidable implications of rational thought, they can countenance neither a self-imposed ignorance nor the cultural vacuum that rational enlightenment entails. To quote the close of La Mettrie’s *L’Homme machine* (1747): “So there is my system, or rather the truth, short and simple, if I am not very much deceived. Deny it if you can!”¹⁰³ As the Underground Man himself would later put it, “it’s impossible to protest! It’s two times two makes four!”¹⁰⁴

Those who did wish to protest, it seemed to many philosophers, would be forced to abandon reason altogether and return, cap in hand, to the old sources of spiritual authority. Of course, this was no problem for the religious old-guard, who had been expecting it from the beginning;¹⁰⁵ but for those who had entered into the spirit of Enlightenment and progress, it would mean a victory for conservatism and, ironically, yet another blow to human dignity: it would mean that humans are not even capable of protecting their own spiritual needs without subjecting themselves to religious authorities or giving in to romantic “enthusiasm” or “fanaticism” (in German, *Schwärmerei*) and rejecting the most insistent conclusions of the one thing which, to them, raised them above the animals in the first place—their rationality and the culture and civilization which came with it. The problem was a metaphilosophical one: must the unfettered use of reason and imagination—the absolute freedom granted by human sublimity—necessarily lead, as Jacobi argued, to the destruction of all values which give human existence its special dignity?

¹⁰² Carlyle, 1908: 242f.

¹⁰³ La Mettrie, 1994: 76.

¹⁰⁴ Dostoevsky, 2001: 10.

¹⁰⁵ McMahon, 2002.

It is in this context that the *Sturm und Drang* movement emerged. It can be understood, at least in the paradigmatic cases considered here, as a direct response to the threat posed to human dignity by the nihilism of the Enlightenment. Of course, it is not always seen in this way—I noted above that it is perhaps most often seen as political—but the more abstract philosophical dimension is also generally recognized. David Hill, for example, reads Schiller’s *Robbers* in basically political terms, as a critique of feudal despotism, but also states that “Karl [in *The Robbers*] is motivated by despair, that is to say, the disappointment of his belief in a moral universe.”¹⁰⁶ It is solely in this way that I propose to view these texts here. The blind striving of the hero is the desperate final gesture of beleaguered idealism, struggling to maintain a sense of sublime transcendence in the face of Enlightenment sceptical rationalism. As we shall see, one can find abundant evidence for this in both *The Robbers* and *Faust*. As Carlyle puts it, in his commentary on the latter:

The day of Magic is gone by; Witchcraft has been put a stop to by Act of Parliament. But the mysterious relations which it emblemized still continue; the Soul of Man still fights with the dark influences of Ignorance, Misery and Sin; still lacerates itself, like a captive bird, against the iron limits which Necessity has drawn around it; still follows False Shows, seeking peace and good on paths where no peace or good is to be found.¹⁰⁷

The individual still feels the pull of the romantic, the supernatural, the ideal, and struggles to come to terms with this aspect of human existence even in the wake of widespread secularization and the demystification of nature, and it is precisely against this demystification that “the Soul of Man” struggles “like a captive bird” and craves freedom from reality itself. Just like the Underground Man, the characters of Schiller’s and Goethe’s plays illustrate the consequences of simultaneous

¹⁰⁶ Hill, 2003(b): 178f.

¹⁰⁷ Carlyle, 1908: 286.

commitments to both idealism and nihilism. It is through these characters that I hope to illuminate Dostoevsky's intentions in *Notes from Underground*.

6. The Robbers

This play, published in 1781, centres on two brothers, Franz and Karl Moor. Franz embodies the Enlightenment spectre of sceptical nihilism: he uses reason to methodically demolish ideas of morality, virtue and religion.¹⁰⁸ He sees such things as means of maintaining the dominion of traditional authorities, and of preventing great people from realizing their full potential: he calls it "the witchcraft that they veil in clouds of holy incense to abuse our fearful nature."¹⁰⁹ Of course, on the basis of such conceptions he resolves to pay no attention to moral scruples, and to circumvent the promptings of his conscience:

Fear nothing, and you are as powerful as if all fear you. It is the fashion nowadays to lace one's breeches so that one can wear them tight or loose as one pleases. We will have ourselves a conscience made in the latest style, so that we can let it out nicely as we grow.¹¹⁰

He is particularly anxious to do so, because he is by no means content to accept the humble position nature has allotted him—he claims he has "every right to be resentful of nature"¹¹¹—and must resort to devious means of compensating for his natural inadequacies. Karl is the first-born and favoured son, and stands to inherit their father's estate; what's more, he is good-looking and charismatic, and has won the love of their father's ward Amalia. Franz envies him on both counts, and intends to cheat in order to put right the wrongs which misfortune has heaped upon him. To be a great

¹⁰⁸ Schiller, 1992: 190f.

¹⁰⁹ Schiller, 1992: 191.

¹¹⁰ Schiller, 1992: 190. In this respect he is, of course, just like Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*.

¹¹¹ Schiller, 1992: 189.

hero is to be “master” over others and over one’s weaknesses: “Am I, too, to let myself be led along by it, like a little boy? Very well, then! courage, and to work! I will crush everything that stands in the way of my becoming master. And master I must be, to force my way to goals that I shall never gain by kindness.”¹¹²

Karl is no less intent on great deeds and heroism, but his conception of greatness is quite different. He reads of heroes in the *Lives* of Plutarch, and admires chivalry and traditional virtues, whereas the rationalist Franz regards all virtues as spurious and fictitious.¹¹³ In spite of his much more romantic tastes and morals, Karl *shares* his brother’s nihilism—even though he loves virtue and heroism, he finds himself unable to avoid the consequences of the sceptical reasoning that Franz embraces more willingly. According to Kevin Hilliard, though Karl shares Franz’s positive attitude towards evil, he lacks the “*doctrinal* underpinning in materialism and atheism”—he repudiates the modern “scribbling” writers who propound such doctrines.¹¹⁴ He thus implies that Karl’s evil, unlike Franz’s, is unrelated to nihilism. That Karl refers to nihilistic philosophers and explicitly rejects them, however, goes to show that he knows what they stand for, and deliberately opposes it. His attitude towards life is thus a deliberate stand against materialism, since he perceives it as a threat to the human dignity exemplified by Plutarch’s ancient heroes.

He too views the world in reductive materialistic terms, as dominated by the inhuman, destructive forces of nature; and he feels compelled to view human life in tragic terms. In a line which encapsulates the central theme of the Underground Man’s complaints against utopian socialism, Karl laments: “Why should a human being succeed where he imitates the ant and be thwarted when he’s like the gods? Or is this the limit

¹¹² Schiller, 1992: 191. Also: “Everything depends on how one looks at these things; and the man who does not look according to his own advantage is a fool” (Schiller, 1992: 259). And: “Our gouty, splenetic moralist of a conscience may chase wrinkled hags out of brothels and torture old usurers on their deathbeds—it will never get a hearing with me” (Schiller, 1992: 260).

¹¹³ “I hate this age of scribblers, when I can pick up my Plutarch and read of great men” (Schiller, 1992: 191).

¹¹⁴ Hilliard, 2011: 176.

destined for his endeavour?"¹¹⁵ He is in much the same position as the Underground Man. The latter's "heightened consciousness of the sublime and beautiful" is evidence of his respect for the romantic ideals of honour and justice that motivate Karl; and, like Karl, he is unable to overlook the extent to which the world described by modern science falls short of these ideals. It is noteworthy that Karl uses the same analogy as the Underground Man: human society can prosper only when it becomes antlike, and devotes itself to a mindless industry that respects none of the higher values prized by human beings. That both men cling to their ideals in spite of this scientific disillusionment merely intensifies their despair. Thus, in spite of the advantages he has over Franz, Karl shares his brother's sense of chronic disappointment. He recognizes in himself an idealistic yearning that can never be satisfied, no matter what he may do, because of the inherent inhospitability of the real world: "why this burning hunger for happiness? Why this ideal of unattained perfection? This looking to another world for what we have failed to achieve in this [...]?"¹¹⁶

In general, Karl, Franz and the Underground Man all have the same attitudes towards nihilism and their respective idealisms. All three of them are heavily invested in quite similar romantic ideals of human dignity, greatness and heroism. We can think of this in terms of the "spiritual needs" discussed above; each of these characters has invested his self-esteem and dignity in the sublime "loftiness" honoured by Coleridge in his "Sonnet to the Author of the 'Robbers.'"¹¹⁷ They need to know that they are greater than the world around them, are not limited by the same conventions and laws, not bound by contingent circumstances, and can expect their ideals to triumph over reality. Although Franz tends to emphasize the usefulness of nihilism—it provides him, he thinks, with the strength to ignore morality—he nevertheless recoils from its dehumanizing implications, complaining that his "high-flying spirit" is

¹¹⁵ Schiller, 1992: 244.

¹¹⁶ Schiller, 1992: 272.

¹¹⁷ "Ah! Bard tremendous in sublimity! / Could I behold thee in thy loftier mood / Wandering at eve with finely-frenzied eye / Beneath some vast old tempest-swinging wood! / Awhile with mute awe gazing I would brood: / Then weep aloud in a wild ecstasy!" (Coleridge, 1997: 61).

“shackled” by the natural world materialistically understood.¹¹⁸ Karl has the opposite problem, and though he denounces nihilist philosophers as “scribblers,” he is nevertheless a man of “consciousness” (as the Underground Man would say) and so cannot simply dismiss the truths of rational science and philosophy, even though they undermine his ideals. The Underground Man sometimes seems to align himself with Franz’s pragmatic attitude to morality, but is generally more akin to Karl.

What is of most interest here is that in response to their disillusionment with reality, both Karl and Franz feel the craving for unlimited freedom which characterizes the Underground Man. Franz is prepared to accept the dehumanizing consequences of science and scepticism, since they allow him to overstep the limits of traditional morality; but (as suggested above) he is left with a gnawing sense of contempt for the world, which he now views in such an unflattering light, and a mad desire to transcend its limitations: “must my plans submit to the iron yoke of mechanical laws? Is my high flying spirit to be bound to the snail’s pace of material necessity?”¹¹⁹ This feeling of constraint is evidence in Franz of a residual unwillingness to relinquish the sublimity of his “high flying spirit” and to capitulate entirely to mundane reality. It is in Karl, however, that the feeling of constraint is strongest, and it is through his character that *The Robbers* also illustrates the destructive potential of pure caprice. Whereas Franz uses his nihilism as an excuse to satisfy his desires immorally, Karl sometimes takes the transgression of limits for an end in itself, and appears at times to be motivated by no thought other than the unfettered exercise of his own power. “I am supposed to lace my body in a corset,” he says, “and straitjacket my will with laws. The law has cramped the flight of eagles to a snail’s pace. The law never yet made a great man, but freedom will breed a giant, a colossus.”¹²⁰ I shall explore the theme of Karl’s caprice in the remainder of this chapter.

¹¹⁸ Schiller, 1992: 209.

¹¹⁹ Schiller, 1992: 209.

¹²⁰ Schiller, 1992: 192.

In Chapter 5, I argued that the Underground Man remains an idealist in spite of his disillusionment, and that his argument against utopian socialism, which extols the value of caprice as “the most advantageous advantage,” must be understood in the context of this idealism. Were it not for the persistence of his idealism, he would not be unwilling to capitulate to the designs of the utopian socialists. In the first place, he rejects these designs because they are insulting to his far loftier conception of utopia; in the second place, and more importantly, he rejects them because their nihilist foundations *provoke in him a capricious reaction*. The Underground Man becomes capricious when his idealism is confounded by the nihilism of his utopian socialist opponents. It is precisely the same with Karl Moor: he becomes capricious when his nihilism and his idealism come into conflict. His capricious reaction to the impossibility of his ideal must thus be understood as a product of his continued, albeit disillusioned, devotion to that ideal.

Karl is disillusioned in three main stages. Firstly, when he is led to believe that his father has disowned him; this leads him to lose faith in the justice of God’s creation. Secondly, when he finds that his robber band has been murdering women and children for no good reason; this leads him to lose faith in his own ability to correct the injustice of God’s creation. Thirdly, when he is reconciled with his father and lover but cannot, having vowed allegiance to the robbers, honourably renounce his criminal lifestyle. In all three cases, Karl’s ideal of justice is insulted. In all cases, furthermore, his nihilism lies at the basis of his disillusionment; and in all cases his disillusionment leads to a capricious reaction, as we shall see below.

6.1. Karl’s First Disillusionment

Despite his rebelliousness, it is clear early in the play that Karl has always intended to return to his ancestral seat, be reconciled with his father and marry Amalia. This intention is thwarted by the machinations of Franz, who, jealous of Karl, tricks their

father into thinking that Karl is beyond redemption and should be disowned; he sends Karl a letter to this effect. Franz's plan is successful beyond expectation, and Karl explodes when he reads the letter which, he thinks, strips him of family ties and robs him of his beloved father's love. He immediately drops his plans of returning home, and throws himself with redoubled effort into villainy.¹²¹

Although Karl's rebellion is triggered initially by the (supposed) fact that his father has disowned him, it is clear that this event is merely a catalyst or an excuse, rather than his main *rationale*. Karl sees this letter as a manifestation of more pervasive forces of injustice: he takes it as evidence of the fact that there are no laws of morality binding father and son, and by extension that there is no morality at all, and from this deduces the vacuity of his own most cherished notions. (It is noteworthy that Karl consistently relates his own personal disappointments to broader philosophical and theological themes: the problem of evil, theodicy, justice and morality.¹²²) It is *evidence* of the truth of nihilism, the defeat of Plutarch at the hands of the modern "scribbling" philosophers, and thus the frustration of his spiritual needs and sense of human dignity.

Indeed, Karl had only just been "deep in a book," his Plutarch, reading of "great men," when he received Franz's letter. When he reads the letter he feels not only that his dream of happiness has been denied, but that his lofty ideals of justice, honour and bonds of blood have also been undermined; he has become a disillusioned idealist. It is at precisely this point, significantly, that he begins to desire freedom at all costs:

See, the scales have fallen from my eyes! What a fool I was, to seek to return to the cage! My spirit thirsts for deeds, my lungs for freedom—murderers, robbers! at that word I trampled the law beneath my feet—

¹²¹ Schiller, 1992: 201.

¹²² When Karl discovers that Franz has imprisoned their father in a dungeon, for example, he articulates his outrage in extremely high-flown language: "Look, look! the laws of creation are made a game of dice, the bonds of nature are rent asunder, the ancient strife is let loose, the son has struck his father dead" (Schiller, 1992: 276).

men showed me no humanity, when to humanity I appealed; so let me forget sympathy and human feeling!¹²³

This is the first point at which Karl seems genuinely capricious, in the sense of the Underground Man, and to crave absolute freedom from all limitations on his wilfulness.¹²⁴ In defence of his “freedom,” Karl goes on to fight with all his might against every constraint he encounters: not only the law, but also economic inequality (as a kind of Robin Hood figure), the militia, the church, family ties. This is no doubt part of what has led critics to view the work in political terms; he is seen to be oppressed by the constraints imposed upon him by rigid social hierarchies and unjust laws. Evidently, though, Karl is not really oppressed by constraints beyond the normal limitations of human corporeal existence (he is of course wanted for his crimes, and thus oppressed by the militia, but this is a purely accidental constraint that he brought upon himself *after* becoming rebellious). His problem is that the more he feels his ideals—in this case, virtue, justice, mercy, etc.—to be incapable of realization, the more he feels shackled by reality at large, and the more he struggles to free himself from every constraint on his power; his destructive craving for freedom is thus a pathological consequence of his disillusionment. As stated, there are two similar outbursts later in the play, both of which follow the same pattern: idealism comes into conflict with nihilism, producing disillusionment and then caprice.

Even after this abrupt abandonment of his former hopes, and this declaration of villainy, Karl does not lose sight of his ideal. It becomes apparent that although he has abandoned the idea that human relations are governed by enduring, God-given principles of honour and justice (which pertain, most significantly for him, to the father-son relationship¹²⁵), he is nevertheless devoted to the idea that human beings can,

¹²³ Schiller, 1992: 203.

¹²⁴ According to Waldeck, *The Robbers* thus illustrates the pitfalls of a “false idea” of freedom, conceived as lawlessness, which threatens to destroy the foundations of society. This seems correct as far as it goes, but Waldeck does not attempt to explore the psychological foundations of Karl’s craving for this false freedom (Waldeck, 1986: 4-6).

¹²⁵ Presumably, this is also emblematic of the relation between God and humanity.

through force of will, *forge* such principles and implement them in spite of God's failure to do so. He thus remains an idealist, although he has changed his mind about the conditions under which he can hope for his ideal of justice to be realized. Karl's idealism manifests throughout the play in his unyielding hatred of injustice. In spite of his decision to "forget sympathy and human feeling," as the leader of his "robbers" he is explicitly compared by one of his band to Robin Hood, suggesting that although his actions are technically illegal, they are nevertheless morally justified.¹²⁶ It is clear that far from having rejected the ideal of justice, he sees himself as fighting for it. This is why he recoils from base or horrible crimes like petty thievery or the murder of innocents, that are selfish or benefit no one.¹²⁷ He sees no justice in the natural order of God's creation, so he takes the dispensation of justice upon himself. He even presents himself as a usurper of God's role as judge: "I shall come amongst you," he says, "and terrible shall be my judgment upon you."¹²⁸

6.2. Karl's Second Disillusionment

The fact that he remains an idealist means that he is liable to be disillusioned again. Indeed, he finds to his shame that the roles of Robin Hood and divine judge were only ever a comforting illusion, and lead to crimes that he finds repulsive. This first becomes apparent when his band attacks a town to rescue a comrade, and one of his men murders a baby by throwing it into the flames of a burning infirmary. This act

¹²⁶ Schiller, 1992: 226

¹²⁷ "I am no thief," he says, and prefers to think of himself as a heroic or titanic villain (Schiller, 1992: 237). Similarly, when Franz attempts unsuccessfully to pray for his salvation, he is almost comically unable to admit that his grand criminal schemes are actually *wrong*: "Lord God, I have been no common murderer — Lord God, I have never stooped to trifles —" (Schiller, 1992: 288). This is an important idea for Dostoevsky. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, the Schilleresque gallant Dmitry is also horrified by the idea that he might be considered capable of thievery (e.g. Dostoevsky, 2003(d): 159); in *Crime and Punishment*, Raskolnikov is (unlike Franz) ostensibly tormented less by his conscience than he is disgusted by the aesthetic paucity of his crime (Dostoevsky, 2003(b)). I shall not attempt to investigate the full significance of this theme here.

¹²⁸ Schiller, 1992: 232.

brings Karl to despair, for it shows that he is incapable of controlling the negative consequences of his supposedly good, or at least high-minded, intentions:

Hear them not, avenger in heaven! How can I prevent it? How can you prevent it, when your pestilence, your famine, your floods devour the just man with the wicked? Who can command the flame, and bid it spare the hallowed crops when it shall destroy the hornets' nest? Oh shame upon the murder of children! of women! of the sick! How this deed bows my head!¹²⁹

This mood of despair does not persist, however; far from relinquishing command of the robbers, Karl is spurred to greater feats of daring and rebellion. As a pretext for the exercise of this renewed combativeness, Schiller has the secret camp of the robbers be discovered by the militia. Though taken by surprise at the moment of his disillusionment, Karl quickly regains his wits: he deliberately allows the militia to surround his camp, so that his men will be forced to fight "in desperation," just as he himself would like to.¹³⁰

The camp is then visited by a priest, sent by the authorities to frighten Karl into surrendering, but introduced by Schiller as a foil for Karl's demonic abandonment of all moral and rational restraints. Shocked by Karl's unrepentant and haughty mockery, the priest offers pardon to the robber band, if they will betray him and turn him in. To his astonishment, Karl joins him to insult the robbers, goad them on and explain in rational terms why they ought to take up the priest's offer: "[justice] speaks to you with heaven's voice of reconciliation, and you are in truth damned. There is not a hair upon your heads, not upon one of you, that is not destined for hell. Will you still consider? Are you still in doubt? Is it so hard to choose between heaven and hell?"¹³¹ Such language, combined with the presence of the priest, whose offers Karl and his band reject, gives the scene a sense of religious rebellion and emphasizes the fact that Karl is rebelling not against any particular human institution, but against the deficient

¹²⁹ Schiller, 1992: 232.

¹³⁰ Schiller, 1992: 233.

¹³¹ Schiller, 1992: 233.

moral order of the world itself. The robbers pledge themselves to Karl in spite of his insults and attempts to persuade them not to. His derisive tone then changes to one of exaltation: “(*tearing himself free, joyfully*) Now we are free.—Comrades! I feel an army in my fist—death or liberty!—at least they shall take none of us alive!” At this point, Karl has insured that they are indeed free of both rationality and morality—they follow him in spite of his assurances that this is neither the sensible nor the right thing to do—they, like Karl, are now prepared to fight and die for no reason at all but sheer wilfulness and the will to exert themselves as powerfully as possible.

6.3. Karl’s Third Disillusionment

The cycle of idealism, disillusionment and caprice reaches a third and final climax only at the play’s tragic conclusion. Having escaped the authorities, taken revenge on Franz, been reunited with his father and Amalia, Karl is forced to confront the implications his actions. Upon discovering that his father still loves him, he realizes that he himself has made genuine reconciliation impossible. When Amalia then professes her love for him, Karl reacts with violence and a yearning for chaos and destruction. They remind him of his ideal, and remind him of its impossibility: he is now “Robber Moor” and cannot possibly return to a life of domestic happiness. He then cries out: “Tear her from my neck! Kill her! Kill him! me, yourselves! Everything! The whole world falls in ruins!”¹³² He goes into a frenzy, leashing out against his men and running into a tree.¹³³ This is the final apotheosis of Karl’s caprice, brought about by the coincidental meeting of his highest ideal—personified in Amalia—with the fact that this ideal is completely hopeless—the nadir of his own infamy and disgrace. When Amalia persists in her love, despite Karl’s manic assurances that he is unworthy of it, he eventually relents and, for a brief moment, is prepared to believe that happiness is once again possible; his robbers, however, remind him of his oath of loyalty to them, and he is forced to reject Amalia.

¹³² Schiller, 1992: 293.

¹³³ An oak tree, symbol of the prosperous family.

Karl then kills Amalia at her own behest, and this is understandably the final blow to his aspirations. Not only has he failed to implement justice, he has had to conclude by murdering the object and symbol of his original idealism. This final consequence of his own demonic rebellion against God's order teaches him that he must be humble and accept his own limitations:

I took it upon myself, O Providence, to smooth the jagged edges of your sword and make good your partiality—but—oh, childish vanity—here I stand at the limit of a life of horror, and see now with weeping and gnashing of teeth, that *two men such as I would destroy the whole moral order of creation*. Mercy—mercy for the youth who sought to anticipate Thy judgment—Thine alone is a vengeance.¹³⁴

Here Karl seems to have realized that idealism must be replaced by faith: rather than demand that the world conform to his hopes and expectations, or the real conform to his ideal, he must acquiesce in the assurance that God will ensure that everything is for the best. Despite the protestations of his comrades, Karl then decides to surrender to the authorities and accept punishment for his crimes. Although he appears to have understood the importance of humility and faith, however, Karl's final resolution still smacks of pride. Giving himself up is the only means of restoring his self-esteem: in his dejected state, fleeing the law would be cowardice, so he turns himself in as a means of proving his bravery. He also likes the idea of being admired for it.¹³⁵ Schiller thus suggests that Karl is still motivated by his ideal of heroism, rather than the God-fearing humility he has come to understand and to profess. Here, though, the play comes to an end.

Karl's belated acknowledgement of the "moral order of creation" is somewhat puzzling, but may be intended to suggest that the tragic sequence of events depicted in the play was not accidental, but the predictable consequence of the choices made by the characters, and Karl in particular. While Franz is the really *evil* brother, Karl

¹³⁴ Schiller, 1992: 296f.

¹³⁵ Schiller, 1992: 297. In all of these respects, Karl's surrender may be compared with Starvrogin's "confession" to Tikhon in *Demons* (Dostoevsky, 2008: 751-787).

himself may be seen as the primary agent of his own downfall—even though Franz tricked him into devoting himself to villainy, it is clear that Karl is no less to blame for *allowing* himself to be tricked so easily. If Karl had not been so disposed—if he had been willing, instead of becoming the leader of the robbers, to simply return to his father’s estate in a spirit of reconciliation, or at least to ascertain the truth for himself—he would have uncovered Franz’s plot and the tragic outcome of the play might well have been entirely averted. Indeed, as I have argued, Franz’s deception was merely a convenient pretext for Karl’s decision to extricate himself, through criminality and rebellion, from the strictures of normal existence. That he would at some point make this decision was the natural consequence of his impetuous dedication to romantic ideals of justice and Plutarchian heroism, impetuous in light of the fact that he knew such ideals to be old-fashioned and probably untenable—that is, the natural consequence of his conflicting attitudes of idealism and nihilism.

* * *

It is important to note again that Karl remains an idealist even after being repeatedly disillusioned. His disillusionment is recognition of the impracticality or impossibility of his ideal; it does not mean that he has relinquished this ideal, but only that he has come to see his devotion to it as futile, that his idealism is frustrated. Alan Leidner remarks that the play could not have been so successful if there was any doubt about whether Karl’s idealism was genuine: frustrated idealism belonged to the spirit of the age.¹³⁶ As I have argued, it is precisely the frustration of Karl’s idealism by nihilism that is responsible for his rebelliousness in general, and his various capricious outbursts—in which he curses everything and craves absolute freedom—in particular. According to Ilse Graham:

Karl’s higher promptings, his fidelity and his rectitude, have indeed been displaced by the upsurge of excessive instinctual drives. But so far from ceasing to function without a proper domain of their own, these

¹³⁶ Leidner, 2003: 280.

moral impulses attach themselves to his anarchic instincts, surreptitiously reinforcing them until their tyranny becomes absolute and untenable and the whole diseased system breaks down.¹³⁷

It is not “instinctual drives” that co-opt the force of Karl’s idealism, his “higher promptings,” as if he was merely unable to control his evil inclinations; rather it is despair of being able to fulfil his ideals. This despair is caused ultimately by his nihilism, his disbelief in higher principles, which is in turn the consequence both of his exposure to the hated modern “scribbling” philosophers and his own experiences of injustice. I nevertheless endorse Graham’s general suggestion that Karl’s idealism, far from being destroyed by it, actually causes and fuels his capricious abandonment. It is the same with the Underground Man.¹³⁸

7. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have established that there are significant parallels between the *Sturm und Drang* and *Notes from Underground*. Both present idealistic characters reacting against nihilism, and reacting capriciously against everything. We have seen that nihilism was prevalent during the Enlightenment, and perceived by many as a serious threat to human dignity; and we know it enjoyed a resurgence in Russia in the nineteenth century. I have seen in this phenomenon, and the disillusionment it entails, the cause of the capriciousness present both in the heroes of the *Sturm und Drang* and the Underground Man; this was illustrated with reference to Schiller’s *Robbers* in particular.

¹³⁷ Graham, 1974: 104.

¹³⁸ Graham’s remarks can be compared with what Malcolm Jones has written about Dostoevsky’s unwholesome characters more generally: “The ideals of these heroes and heroines have not so much been destroyed as suppressed, and from their refuge in the unconscious they exercise a baleful influence on the conscious life of the individual as rival second ideas, to emerge under conditions of great stress as unwelcome guests in the conscious life itself” (Jones, 1974: 345).

In laying some theoretical foundations for understanding *Sturm und Drang* heroism, I introduced concepts derived from or pertaining to Schiller's theoretical writings: the sublime, the Kantian "needs of reason," human dignity, nihilism. Having exercised these concepts in reading Schiller's *Robbers*, and in comparing the Underground Man to its hero Karl Moor, I shall elaborate on them further in the next chapter with a view to attaining a full explanation of the capriciousness of these characters. My main intention in this chapter has been to begin to place Dostoevsky's novel into a context that allows us to make sense of it, and in particular, at first, to disentangle the psychological peculiarities of its narrator. The connection between idealism, disillusionment and caprice has been identified as a central preoccupation of Schiller and other *Sturm und Drang* writers. In the next chapter, I shall begin by focusing on Schiller's essays, which complement works such as *The Robbers* in that they investigate similar phenomena from a theoretical rather than an artistic perspective. Indeed, Schiller explicitly refers to Goethe's heroes, and implicitly to his own, in ways that are highly illuminating to the present investigation. I shall argue that Schiller provides an explanation for the phenomenon of caprice that coheres perfectly with his characterization of Karl Moor and—as we shall see—Goethe's characterization of Faust. Through showing how this explanation illuminates such characters as Moor and Faust, and having linked them by way of comparison to the Underground Man, I arrive at an explanation for the Underground Man's caprice that allows us, finally, to make sense of the psychological underpinnings of Dostoevsky's social-philosophical polemic in *Notes from Underground*.

Chapter 7: The Savage and the False Idealist

1. Introduction

In the last chapter, I outlined Schiller's theory of the sublime, and his psychological theory of the way in which appreciation of the sublime is connected to the arousal of "spiritual needs," which pertain to the need of a human being to feel that he or she is not merely an animal, but has a special "human dignity" that distinguishes him or her from the rest of the natural world. These spiritual needs concern *ideals*—such as the Underground Man's or Karl Moor's romantic ideals of heroism, love, and honour—which the individual needs to realize in order to find confirmation of his or her human dignity. In this chapter, I find that Schiller's theory of spiritual needs can be used as an explanation for the psychology of caprice discussed and illustrated above. The explanation is based on Schiller's description of what happens to people whose spiritual needs are persistently frustrated and left unfulfilled: such people, he thinks, become capricious in a way that should be recognizable to readers of both *The Robbers* and *Notes from Underground*.

In the following, I examine some passages from Schiller's theoretical works, including his major essays *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1794) and *On Naive and Sentimental Poetry* (1795-1796). While examining Schiller's essays, I shall note some points of relevance to *The Robbers* and *Notes from Underground*, where Schiller describes psychological phenomena similar to those embodied by Dostoevsky in the Underground Man. In particular, I argue that Schiller's descriptions of "savages" in transition to civilization, and of idealism—especially what he calls "false idealism"—suggest a theoretical framework for making sense of the Underground Man's "Schillerism" and its relation to his capriciousness. I illustrate these observations with reference to Goethe's *Faust*, which Schiller himself refers to explicitly, as well as *The Robbers* and *Notes*

from Underground. Having examined Schiller's essays, we will be in a much better position to understand the ideas embodied in these works, and the way in which Dostoevsky adopted and adapted them for use in *Notes from Underground*, because we will be in possession of psychological notions fit to make sense of their characters' thoughts and actions.

As we have seen, the aesthetics of sublimity and the "needs of reason" or spiritual needs both pertain to the problem of human dignity: both give us a sense that we ought to have a kind of spiritual ascendancy over nature, and challenge us to establish the certainty of this ascendancy as a matter of utmost importance. During the Enlightenment, as we have also seen, scepticism threatened to lead to a nihilism that denied the validity of spiritual needs in general. Because they pertain to the dignity and worth of human existence itself, however, the spiritual needs are extremely pressing and cannot easily be dismissed. In this context, it is especially interesting to note what Schiller thinks will happen if our spiritual needs are *frustrated* and not satisfied, since this reveals the extent to which he regards their satisfaction as fundamental to the healthy development of human character and morals. It also reveals the psychological and moral risks associated with investing one's sense of dignity and self-esteem, idealistically, in sublime transcendence over the natural world—that is, in the satisfaction of one's spiritual needs—especially in the context of nihilism's rejection of this whole project. These risks prove to be highly suggestive as descriptions of the psychology of caprice, and may explain why, for instance, Schiller characterized Karl Moor in the way that he did. By extension, they are highly suggestive as guides to Dostoevsky's characterization of the Underground Man.

2. Spiritual Frustration and Caprice

In his essays, Schiller optimistically assumes that all cultured people are capable of satisfying their spiritual needs, so this is not a theme he dwells on. But, in discussing

the cultural development of humanity, he does consider the limitations of those in a transitional stage between “savagery” and civilization, and the implications of these limitations. Schiller states that “savages” who are unaccustomed to the use of pure reason will, when they first begin to think abstractly about things they cannot perceive with their five senses, also begin to feel the urgency of the needs of reason, but will lack the intellectual proficiency required to satisfy them. For Schiller, since spiritual needs can only be properly articulated in the infinite “realm of ideas,” and since this realm is *terra incognita* to the uncultured savages—much like the inhabitants of Plato’s cave—these people will search in vain for ideals that remain inchoate. Having been aroused before they can be satisfied, their spiritual needs will thus be frustrated. It is at this point that Schiller states, in general terms, his theory of the consequences of this frustration. The problem is that these people have sufficient culture to frame the notion of the “absolute” as an ideal, however obscurely, but insufficient culture to actually attain it and know it. Schiller writes:

On the wings of fancy, man leaves the narrow confines of the present in which mere animality stays bound, in order to strive toward an unlimited future. But while the infinite opens up before his reeling *imagination*, his heart has not yet ceased to live in the particular or to wait upon the moment. [...] [As such,] he will merely be induced by that demand to give his own individuality unlimited extension, rather than to abstract from it altogether.¹

In other words, the drive towards “the infinite” or the ideal, when it is tethered through lack of culture to “the finite” or the worldly, has the effect of creating an infinite, unfulfillable longing for finite, worldly goods. An infinite quantity of finite things is supposed to compensate for a failure to grasp “the infinite” itself, the ideal whose perfection is unbounded and undiluted. To “give one’s individuality unlimited extension” is to demand that the world conform to one’s whims: to treat the

¹ Schiller, 1993: 159.

world as an extension of one's self, as if it ought to be malleable, like the flights of intellect and imagination by which one approaches the ideal, by force of will alone.²

Schiller's description is quite abstract, but its significance seems clear enough. The capriciousness of the savage is the *misdirection* of the unlimited freedom of the spirit, which we are supposed to enjoy when, through the experience of sublimity, we leave the real world behind and enter the realm of ideas. Recall that in experiencing the sublime, we feel that "the laws of nature are not necessarily our laws as well."³ Plainly, this deliverance from the laws of nature only makes sense in the realm of ideas; but the savage, who lacks the powers of intellect and imagination needed for navigating this realm, goes astray and wrongly demands the same kind of freedom in the real world.

This is significant here because it closely resembles the capriciousness of *Sturm und Drang* heroism, of Karl Moor, and of the Underground Man, which, after all, we are ultimately trying to explain. It is not hard to see that such an individual will be unwilling to submit to constraints of any kind, and, perpetually frustrated, will inveigh against everything that comes in the way of his "unlimited individuality," as the Underground Man himself does at some length. This is the essence of caprice: the refusal to acknowledge the authority of the laws of nature, the laws of rational thought, the laws of morality, or anything else that seems to diminish the absolute freedom of the will.

Of course, there are differences between the Underground Man and the savages described by Schiller. Schiller's savage is striving blindly to know the transcendent "absolute" in quasi-Platonic fashion, while the Underground man is striving to live the life of a dashing romantic hero. As stated above, however, this obvious difference conceals a deeper similarity: they are both striving at the behest of their spiritual

² Schiller seems to be exploiting an ambiguity in the word "infinite": is the *infinitude* of the ideal, or of "the infinite" as such, the same as the *infinitude* of the unlimited finite goods that the savage seeks in its place?

³ Schiller, 1993: 74.

needs to confirm their visions of human dignity. It might also seem problematic for this comparison that the Underground Man is at the very opposite pole of civilization and culture from the savages. If Schiller's psychological explanation only pertains to budding philosophers at the dawn of civilization, of what relevance can it be for understanding the Underground Man's capriciousness? On this front, I would argue that the aptness of Schiller's description to the Underground Man is by no means a coincidence. To see why, however, we must read between the lines of Schiller's essays.

In his theoretical writings, as noted above, Schiller glosses over the difficulty of actually satisfying one's spiritual needs. But for Schiller this optimism would have been misplaced at any other time during the Enlightenment, when, as we saw in the previous chapter, the problem of scepticism and the concomitant threat of nihilism cast doubt on the validity of the spiritual needs of humanity, and endangered the possibility of satisfying them at all. Writing his essays in the 1790s, Schiller had already been convinced by Kant and post-Kantian philosophers like Fichte, his colleague at the University of Jena, that the challenge of Enlightenment scepticism could be defeated philosophically, and that there was therefore less need to worry about the frustration of the needs of reason by scepticism; this is why he suggests it is only a problem for "savages," and does not treat it at length.⁴ His earlier dramatic work was, however, completed before this period of optimism, and reveals a much greater preoccupation with scepticism and frustration—as we saw in the case of *The Robbers*. This earlier preoccupation also becomes apparent, as we shall see below, in his description of modern sentimentalism and idealism in *On Naive and Sentimental Poetry*, which draws on the literary models he and Goethe had created while most troubled by the threat of scepticism, and most worried about the possibility of ever satisfying their spiritual needs.

Thanks to the nihilistic consequences of Enlightenment scepticism, Franz and Karl Moor are in exactly the same position as the savages described by Schiller in his

⁴ More on this in the next chapter.

Aesthetic Letters. Their plight illustrates the more general applicability of Schiller's views on sublimity and spiritual needs to civilized people as well as savages. It is clear that for Schiller cultivating our appreciation of the sublime, whether in the context of savagery (ignorance of higher values) or in the context of nihilism (denial of higher values), will therefore have negative effects: the sense of ascendancy, of omnipotence, that it is meant to inspire, and that we are meant to exercise in pursuit of our spiritual needs in abstraction from the physical world, will have no outlet; it will come into continuous conflict with the limitations of our natural abilities, and, if Schiller is right, lead to capricious demandingness. Why not simply accept the reality of such constraints, since they are unavoidable in any case? Moreover, why not simply relinquish the impossible ideals in relation to which these constraints are conceived as such? As we have seen, they pertain directly to the matter of human dignity. Thus characters like Karl Moor cannot simply relinquish their ideals, because to do so would be to become despicable in their own eyes; that is why they so stubbornly resist the limitations of reality. And caprice is nothing more than this sense of perpetual and inescapable frustration; the capricious individual is one who perceives everything real as a constraint, and feels just as unfree in ordinary life as any other person would feel in a prison.

This phenomenon, I believe, can be observed in *Notes from Underground* no less than in *The Robbers*. This suggests that Schiller's theory of the sublimity of humanity, and the spiritual needs which stem from this sublimity, may provide a useful guide to understanding the Underground Man's transition from "sublime and beautiful" romanticism, through nihilism, to infinitely demanding capriciousness. Like Franz and Karl Moor, the Underground Man is highly cultured; he has a strong sense of sublimity and feels the pull of his spiritual needs. His ability to leave his limited circumstances "on the wings of fancy" has inculcated him with a sense of his own absolute freedom, and the ability to frame ideals that are absolutely perfect, but he does not believe in the possibility of exercising this freedom constructively: the "realm of ideas" is for him an empty fantasy; he has no hope of realizing any of the ideals he

encounters there; and what *is* real is so far from matching up to these ideals that it leaves him in despair. So this sense of freedom is constantly frustrated by the material constraints that he is unable to transcend. The Underground Man becomes capricious because, like Schiller's savages, he feels the pull of the ideal but cannot attain it—not because he lacks the intellectual capacity to do so, but because he suffers from the influence of a nihilism that had troubled Schiller, too, in his youth.

3. Sentimentalism and Modern Idealism

Naturally, the dispiriting implications of the Enlightenment were most damaging for those who had most deliberately invested their sense of dignity in the kind of sublime idealism described by Schiller, namely, sentimentalists and romantics. As we have seen, Schiller had briefly addressed the implications of frustrated idealism theoretically in his *Aesthetic Letters*, where, however, he was not interested in the hazards of Enlightenment philosophy but in the transition from savagery to civilization. But, given the climate of scepticism prevailing towards the end of the eighteenth century, we should expect his analysis to apply as well to those modern idealists whose aspirations were thwarted by nihilism, or the conviction that the spiritual needs of humanity are spurious and can never be satisfied. Indeed, we have already seen this illustrated by him in *The Robbers*. As stated above, Schiller considers the problem of frustrated idealism again theoretically, and more directly than in the *Aesthetic Letters*, in his later essay *On Naive and Sentimental Poetry*, which contrasts ancient and modern forms of art, referred to as “naive” and “sentimental” respectively. His consideration of sentimental art is particularly interesting here, because it builds on the theme of the gulf between the real and the ideal, and the difficulties that beset the human tendency to strive towards the latter at the expense of the former—i.e. the difficulties that stem from our spiritual needs. This leads Schiller to discuss the related themes of artistic genius and idealism, which both involve a kind of preference for the ideal over the real, and can lead to various moral, spiritual and psychological problems. Here

Schiller seems to delve further into the dangers posed by the sublime and the spiritual needs that accompany human sublimity, which now threaten not only pre-civilized savages but highly civilized moderns as well. Just like the savages of the *Aesthetic Letters*, sentimental poets and geniuses must strive to elevate themselves beyond the world of sense, in order to discover the lofty ideals they are to represent artistically, and, like the savages, must navigate various challenges in order to do so. Much more than in the *Aesthetic Letters*, Schiller here engages with psychological and spiritual problems surrounding the fact that all people, no matter how civilized, are tethered to the real world, and cannot expect to transcend it easily or with impunity. Once again, we find that Schiller's analysis of such problems is highly pertinent to Dostoevsky's characterization of the Underground Man.

The savage becomes capricious, according to Schiller, because of the frustration of his spiritual needs. It is evident that the problem of caprice arises out of disillusioned idealism, which in turn arises out of the belief that there is an unbridgeable gulf between the real and the ideal, such that the ideal is thought to be unrealizable. Logically, there are two ways in which this gulf can be established in a person's mind: either the real is excessively degraded below the ideal, or the ideal is excessively exalted above or away from reality. These two ways are not mutually exclusive, but can be compounded, as we shall see. Above, the first of these phenomena was observed in the case of the savages described by Schiller, as well as in Karl Moor; these people are called to find confirmation of human dignity in the fulfilment of ideals but discover, either because they are culturally limited or because of the influence of nihilistic doctrines and harsh experiences, that they are unable to attain spiritual fulfilment in reality. We have seen that for this reason nihilism poses a special problem for modern idealists like Karl Moor and the Underground Man. In what follows we shall consider Schiller's treatment of the second phenomenon, excessively exalted or wayward idealism, which he takes to be a special problem for modern artists and intellectuals.

The kind of idealism Schiller considers in relation to artistic genius and modern sentimentality in *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry* is characterized by an overwhelming

preference for the imaginary over the actual: “Instead of striving for sensuous objects outside ourselves,” he says, “we prefer to sink meditatively into ourselves where we find, in the world of ideas, nourishment for the awakened urge.”⁵ For Schiller, idealism of this kind is prototypically associated with strict morality and genuinely *good* ideals, because it ought to be oriented towards ideals sanctioned by *reason*, as per the Kantian conception of the spiritual needs as “needs of reason.” But although idealism aims towards morality, Schiller warns that it is dangerously haphazard in its practical results. Idealists are defined in contrast to realists: the former prioritize lofty but distant goals, while the latter concern themselves with mundane but achievable results; idealists tend to overindulge and become lost in idle fantasies.

In other words, because the idealist must extricate himself from the time-tested, reliable mores of the realist (or “man of action,” as the Underground Man would say), he becomes capable of extraordinary and even heroic deeds, but, by the same token, is also prone to waywardness and extravagance in his aims. As such, the higher and more violently he strives towards his ideal, however morally good it may be in itself, the more likely he is to depart from his original course, “since constancy and necessity are, of course, characteristic of nature, but not of freedom.”⁶ Schiller here seems to deviate from Kant’s belief that human beings will be wise and good just as long as they can extricate themselves from the dominion of the material world and the senses. For Schiller, it is not so simple; precisely because idealists leave this world behind and immerse themselves in the element of absolute freedom—the realm of ideas—they become accustomed to independence from all constraints, and are liable to forget even those constraints they ought always to impose upon themselves, namely, those of reason and morality.

This tendency to waywardness is essential to idealism because, he says, “the path from [real] experience to the ideal is quite immense, and in between lies the unbridled

⁵ Schiller, 1993: 234.

⁶ Schiller, 1993: 253.

capriciousness of fantasy.”⁷ Schiller implies it is good for the idealist to depart from reality, but only if, by the guiding lights of reason and morality, he does so in search of ideals that are useful and can be *realized*, so that he may later return to reality and indicate the ways in which it should be improved; if instead he departs from reality to indulge in impossible fantasies—a kind of intellectual libertinism—then the ideals he discovers will be hollow and useless. Whereas the savage struggled to leave the world of sense at all, the modern genius must struggle to retain some degree of contact with it, to avoid chasing after ideals that cannot possibly be realized:

in the effort to set aside all limitations, the sentimental genius is exposed to the danger of transforming human nature completely, that is, the danger of not merely elevating or *idealizing* himself beyond any specific and limited actuality toward the absolute possibility—what it is permitted and supposed to do—but rather of passing beyond the possibility itself or *giving himself up to the reverie of impossible dreams*.⁸

This is, of course, precisely what the Underground Man does: as we saw in the last chapter, the ideals he aspired to were totally unrealistic.⁹ When, after indulging in his idealistic dreams he feels the need to return to reality and attempt to realize his ideals, he is thwarted and disappointed because these ideals were not discovered at the behest of *reason* but, as Schiller would say, of “the unbridled capriciousness of fantasy.” His romantic ideals of love, friendship and community, for instance, are supposed to be realized—for want of more suitable candidates—in the company of his only regular acquaintance, office chief Anton Antonych, who is a completely ordinary person falling far below the aspirations the Underground Man would foist upon him.¹⁰ Likewise, when the Underground Man attempts to force Zverkov to recognize his superior culture, and then rushes after him to challenge him to a duel, he acts not from any consideration of how the world *is*, but from a fantastic notion of how he and the world *ought to be*, and is doomed to fail. As Malcolm Jones has written, Dostoevsky

⁷ Schiller, 1993: 243.

⁸ Schiller, 1993: 240.

⁹ Dostoevsky, 2001: 40f.

¹⁰ Dostoevsky, 2001: 41f.

thereby shows that the “ideal of harmony and beauty which so fascinates mankind is a mixed blessing. Dostoyevsky stresses how easily such ideals are distorted by man, and his novels furnish many examples of such distortion.”¹¹

Above, I pointed out that people can become disillusioned in one or both of two ways: reality can be degraded below the ideal by nihilism, misfortune or ignorance; or the ideal can be exalted above or perverted away from reality through waywardness and extravagance. In both cases, the gulf between the real and the ideal is widened. For Schiller, a modern “sentimental idealist” like the Underground Man is especially prone to the latter mode of disillusionment. He becomes lost in fantasies that cannot be realized, and is inevitably frustrated when he returns to life and is confronted by the shortcomings of reality. In this way, we may observe, he suffers the same disappointment as the savage, but from a different direction. The savage has an unduly limited conception of reality, and becomes frustrated because his spiritual needs call for something beyond what, in his ignorance, he takes to be possible. The modern idealist becomes frustrated because his lofty ideals, formed in wayward abstraction from reality, really are impossible. The modern idealist who is also a nihilist, however, suffers doubly from an unduly limited conception of reality and an excessively exalted conception of the ideal. It is to this third category, in fact, that the Underground Man belongs. To understand this class of disillusioned idealists more fully, we may turn to another, even more famous of its members: Goethe’s Faust. As we shall see, Faust too is thoroughly disillusioned in *both* possible ways: he is stretched in contrary directions by nihilism and wayward idealism, despairs and then—like Karl Moor, and in anticipation of Schiller’s theories—dedicates himself to caprice.

¹¹ Jones, 1976: 31.

4. Faust

Like *The Robbers*, Goethe's *Faust* belonged to the deepest foundations of intellectual culture in Dostoevsky's day; Pushkin had called it "the *Iliad* of our times," and Belinsky agreed.¹² As Herzen recalled, at the turn of the 1840s a "knowledge of Goethe, especially of the second part of *Faust* (either because it is inferior to the first or because it is more difficult), was as obligatory as the wearing of clothes."¹³ Andre von Gronicka has shown that Goethe, and in particular *Faust*, had a pervasive influence on Dostoevsky's fiction, but he limits himself to general observations on Dostoevsky's attitude towards Faustian striving, Mephistophelean negation, and the meek humility of Gretchen, all of which have parallels in several of his characters. The presence of *Faust* in Dostoevsky's fiction is perhaps most immediately noticeable in *The Brothers Karamazov*, in which we encounter a recognizably Mephistophelean devil.¹⁴ Von Gronicka doesn't even mention *Notes from Underground*, however, and he certainly doesn't attempt to draw psychological parallels between Faust's and the Underground Man's caprice. It is worthwhile to pursue this connection here, because to do so is to illuminate the psychology of *Sturm und Drang* caprice itself, and, at the same time, to reveal one of the most important channels—next to Schiller's *Robbers* and his essays—by which it was made familiar to Dostoevsky and his contemporaries.

It should be noted that *Faust* is a complex work composed and published sporadically over many years, and encompasses a wide variety of themes and embedded episodes obscure and difficult to comprehend in varying degrees. Goethe's initial designs for *Faust*, known as the *Urfaust*, belong to his *Sturm und Drang* phase and reveal his preoccupation with the same problem of frustrated idealism that motivated *Werther* and *Götz*.¹⁵ It is the themes belonging to and stemming from these elements of *Faust* that interest me here. I shall thus omit a full summary of the plot and focus instead on

¹² Von Gronicka, 1985, vol. 2: 182. One of Pushkin's most historically significant literary productions was the fragmentary "Scene from Faust," to be considered further in Chapter 9.

¹³ Herzen, 1968: 400.

¹⁴ Dostoevsky, 2003(d): 811-831.

¹⁵ Lamport, 2003: 122. See Goethe, 1980: 221-286 for a translation of the *Urfaust* material.

those scenes and themes that are especially relevant to the present investigation. In the following three subsections, I shall consider *Faust* in relation to the idealism, nihilism, and caprice of its hero, emphasizing the manner in which he conforms to the psychological scheme worked out above and anticipates the psychology of caprice in *Notes from Underground*.

4.1. Faust's Idealism

If his theory of the frustrated and capricious savage is best illustrated with reference to his own *Robbers*, Schiller's descriptions of the wayward intellectual libertine are mirrored most precisely in *Faust*, which he himself refers to in this connection—along with several of Goethe's other works—in *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry*.¹⁶ Goethe's Faust is introduced as an aging scholar and magician who, having dedicated his life to understanding the deepest mysteries of the universe, has become jaded after failing to advance even a step towards this avowedly "infinite goal."¹⁷ Like Karl Moor, Faust is a disillusioned idealist. Unlike Moor's, however, Faust's ideal is theoretical rather than practical; he is not interested in feats of virtue and heroism, but rather in the attainment of special insight into the essence of the universe. His idealism thus conforms quite neatly to the model of the Kantian "needs of reason" discussed in the previous chapter, except that the goal of Faust's striving, his ideal, is nebulous and unspecified. In this respect he is akin to the "savages" described above. But he is also a wayward idealist of the highest order, whose immense intellectual abilities have been channelled into an illusory and inherently unrealizable ideal. As Alexander Gillies puts it: "Only a god or the imagination of a poet can grasp what Faust requires, and Faust indeed elevates himself to the level of a god in making his unbounded demands."¹⁸ It is unclear that Faust himself grasps what he requires, except that he must transcend the normal course of human experience in order to obtain it. Ronald Miller

¹⁶ Schiller, 1993: 221.

¹⁷ Goethe, 1987: 55 (Part One, Sc. 7, line 1815). "We snatch in vain at nature's veil," he says (Goethe, 1987: 23 (Part One, Sc. 4, line 672)).

¹⁸ Gillies, 1957: 55.

aply calls this “the idealism of transcendence”¹⁹; Jane Brown identifies it more specifically as the striving for “a form of gnosis on the typical Neoplatonic model” whereby Faust wishes to attain direct insight into “the Absolute.”²⁰

Naturally, Faust is no more able to attain this ideal than Karl Moor is able to restore justice to the world. In general, his tragedy too “is that of titanism” — the futile desire to usurp powers that do not belong to him, in pursuit of a lofty but unattainable ideal.²¹ Thus *Faust* is like *The Robbers* and other *Sturm und Drang* works in that it grapples with the fundamental inability of human beings to satisfy their spiritual needs. Faust’s supernatural abilities mean that he is especially well suited to playing this role. Of course, in reality there is no magic; Goethe highlights the basic limitations of humanity by showing that even if we *did* have magic and virtually omnipotent servants like Mephistopheles at our disposal, we humans would still be too limited to attain fulfilment of our highest ideals. If not even the great Faust can fulfil his spiritual needs, what hope do the rest of us have? Nigh indomitable heroes like Karl Moor and Götz von Berlichingen represent the apex of human potential; by granting Faust superhuman powers, but not releasing from his fundamental humanness, Goethe effectively raises the theme of human weakness to its highest possible pitch.

Faust’s disillusionment, and its consequences, are concomitantly extreme. The waywardness and “titanic” extravagance of Faust’s idealism sets him up for harsh disappointment, and it is in this way that *Faust* is also well suited to illustrate Schiller’s views on the vagaries of idealism. Having tried and failed to attain the impossible, he laments the weakness of humanity and comes to despise his own vain aspirations. One of the central themes of *Faust* is, as Coleridge noticed, “misology, or hatred and depreciation of knowledge caused by an originally intense thirst for knowledge baffled.”²² Having this statement in mind, I borrowed the term “misology” in Chapter 5 to describe the Underground Man’s attitude towards reason in all its manifestations,

¹⁹ Miller, 1992: 1-13.

²⁰ Brown, 1986: 50.

²¹ Gillies, 1957: 1.

²² Coleridge, 1884: 191.

from common sense to science, mathematics and political philosophy; Faust's attitude is much the same in its general outlines, in that he too comes to regard his intellect as the bane of his existence and, as the Underground Man would say, of his "normal advantage." Thus on one level Faust envies the common people and refreshes himself in their company but, like the Underground Man, cannot lower himself consistently and wholeheartedly to their level; he too is a man of "heightened consciousness."²³ Neither abandonment of the ideal, nor self-imposed ignorance of its impossibility are acceptable to Faust; his intellectual conscience is too strict, and his emotional investment in the fulfilment of his ideal is too great. To acquiesce on either count would be to forfeit his human dignity; thus Faust gives in to despair. Here "rejection of life can present itself as a noble, unflinching commitment to truth, where other weaker mortals would prefer to look away."²⁴ Again, a strain recognizable in *Notes from Underground*.

Like Moor, and the Underground Man, Faust becomes disillusioned because of his contradictory attitudes of idealism and nihilism: on the one hand, he is idealistic in that he cannot rest content with the limitations of reality as he finds it, but strives to transcend them; on the other hand, he is nihilistic in that he suspects it is impossible to do so, because there is nothing—not for human beings at least—beyond them. In general, Faust is keenly aware both of his human dignity, of the absolute power and independence of his spiritual nature, as well as of the limits of his real, earthly existence. His experience seems to confirm the Platonic idea that the bodily, spatiotemporal aspect of human existence is a distraction and an obstacle to the fulfilment of his true purpose:

The spirit's noblest moments, rare and high,
Are choked by matter's alien obtrusion,
And rich with this world's goods we cry
Scorn on those better things as mere illusion.²⁵

²³ Goethe, 1987: 27-37 (Part One, Sc. 5).

²⁴ Hilliard, 2011: 111.

²⁵ Goethe, 1987: 22 (Part One, Sc. 4, lines 634-637).

And again:

And though a god lives in my heart,
Though all my powers waken at his word,
Though he can move my every inmost part—
Yet nothing in the outer world is stirred.²⁶

Faust's disillusionment comes to a head at the beginning of the play, when he uses his magic to summon the Earth Spirit, the quintessence of the natural universe, in order to satisfy his craving for "gnosis." Although it represents the essence of "nature," or rather "Nature," the Earth Spirit is plainly a *supernatural* phenomenon, in the sense that it transcends the normal course of human experience. In summoning it, Faust too wishes to transcend this normal course. This attempt at supernatural communion is a disaster, as the enigmatic and overwhelming spirit mocks Faust's delusions of grandeur. Faust's final attempt to comprehend and master the Absolute, to stare into "the mirror of eternal verity," fails because of his basic human limitations.²⁷ At this point his nihilistic doubts are confirmed and he despairs of his former hopes and aspirations; he gives in to "misology." Nevertheless—like Karl Moor, as we saw in the previous chapter—he does not relinquish his idealism, but only mocks it and abandons hope of fulfilling it. In this respect he is also akin to the Underground Man, of whom Donald Fanger rightly notes:

He is tormented by dreams he can neither disavow nor realize and drawn intermittently to a reality he cannot embrace [...]. So when reality intrudes to show up the dreams, he must ridicule them, for he is too intelligent to ignore reality. Yet the dreams—which are of what life should be—are too far superior to that reality to be relinquished.²⁸

²⁶ Goethe, 1987: 48 (Part One, Sc. 7, lines 1566-1569).

²⁷ Goethe, 1987: 18f. (Part One, Sc. 4, lines 460-517).

²⁸ Fanger, 1965: 178.

4.2. Faust's Nihilism

The driving force of the play comes from the conflict in Faust himself between idealism and nihilism, where the latter is typically represented in the character of Mephistopheles, a devil who has taken up the challenge of bringing Faust to the point of total despair (Goethe establishes this element of the plot with reference to the Book of Job).²⁹ As David Luke writes, the dialectical relation between the cynical devil and the romantic idealist "has strong claims to be considered the unifying and integrating theme of the work as a whole."³⁰ Goethe makes it clear that the *contradiction* between Faust's idealism and his nihilism is the source of his troubles; nihilism alone would not be sufficient. This is highlighted by the juxtaposition of Faust with his assistant Wagner, the archetypal scholar, whose pedantry inoculates him against the idealistic striving that plagues his master. Though he is no less dedicated to science than Faust, Wagner is much more limited in his aspirations: where Faust is always seeking through science some kind of spiritual transcendence, and despairs when this proves to be impossible, Wagner is content to remain cloistered within the confines of the library and laboratory. Goethe thus indicates that nihilism on its own, without any admixture of idealism, may be morally and intellectually desiccating but will not lead to misology or the despairing capriciousness that comes from the disillusionment of idealism. This may seem obvious since, of course, Faust would not feel so disappointed if, like Wagner, he had no aspirations beyond those that can be satisfied in books and laboratories; it is nevertheless an important point to observe if we are to understand the psychology of *Sturm und Drang* heroism and its relation to the nihilism against which it reacts.

Dejected, Faust consigns his soul to Mephistopheles, on the condition that the latter can procure for him a moment of genuine satisfaction:

If ever to the moment I shall say:
Beautiful moment, do not pass away!

²⁹ Goethe, 1987: 9-12 (Part One, Sc. 3).

³⁰ Goethe, 1987: xx.

Then you may forge your chains to bind me,
Then I will put my life behind me³¹

This may be compared with the Underground Man's longing for something at which he cannot "stick out his tongue," a real utopia and not a glorified chicken coop. Faust's commitment is the culmination of his decision not to be taken in by illusions, not to settle for less than what he can really respect.³² It is also the ultimate despairing and spiteful test of his idealism: either it will be satisfied — and he is willing to bet his soul that it will not — or he will spend the rest of his days sampling experiences that always fall short of his desires. Mephistopheles, of course, has no need to win this bet; his goal is to crush Faust's spirit. Instead of "the spirit's noblest moments, rare and high," Faust is inundated with trivial and revolting adventures. As David Luke puts it, Mephistopheles aims "to destroy his idealism by exploiting his restless craving for experience."³³ To win the wager, Faust must prove, through sampling everything, that nothing can truly satisfy him; of course, he believes he knows *a priori* that nothing can do so. His wager thus confirms him, just as Mephistopheles desires, as a "principled nihilist" determined to prove that the world is barren.³⁴ Mephistopheles reveals his plan in monologue:

Fate has endowed him with the blind
Impatience of an ever striving mind;
In headlong haste it drives him on,
He skips the earth and leaves its joys behind.
I'll drag him through life's wastes, through every kind
Of meaningless banality;
He'll struggle like a bird stuck fast, I'll bind
Him hand and foot; in his voracity
He'll cry in vain for food and drink, he'll find
Them dangling out of reach — ah, yes!³⁵

³¹ Goethe, 1987: 52 (Part One, Sc. 7, lines 1699-1702).

³² Hilliard, 2011: 111.

³³ Goethe, 1987: xxxix.

³⁴ Hilliard, 2011: 108.

³⁵ Goethe, 1987: 56 (Part One, Sc. 7, lines 1856-1865).

Faust's idealism, his yearning for something beyond the "meaningless banality" of "life's wastes," is Mephistopheles' target and his leverage. Faust is already convinced that reality is defective, that his aspirations are misguided. It remains for Mephistopheles to drive home this conviction and compound his disillusionment. Disillusionment brought Faust to the point of suicide; he was only saved by a heavenly chorus, and the peal of Easter bells, reminding him of the innocent piety of his youth and the miracle of Christian resurrection.³⁶ As an agent of nihilism, "spirit of perpetual negation," Mephistopheles works against this piety.³⁷

In this respect, he plays the same role as Franz Moor in *The Robbers*. As we saw in the previous chapter, the latter manipulates his brother Karl into devoting himself to destructive wilfulness in much the same way as the former manipulates Faust into giving himself over to frivolity. The catalyst for Karl's caprice is his nihilistic disillusionment with the moral order of the universe, his disappointment at the replacement of Plutarchian heroes with modern "scribbling" moralists, statesmen and philosophers; Franz exacerbates this disillusionment through convincing him that the sacred bonds of family are now dissolved, and that there is therefore no reality corresponding to the ideal of justice. Mephistopheles likewise intends to exacerbate Faust's nihilism through confirming that there is nothing that could possibly satisfy his gnostic yearnings or his "idealism of transcendence" as a whole: the world is barren of sustenance for one who has cultivated his mind and spirit to such an extent, who has such an exalted conception of his own spiritual dignity. More generally, Mephisto's method of frustration by "meaningless banality" parallels, in its effects, the Underground Man's and Karl Moor's own frustrating and unfulfilling lives, as well as the dispiriting influence of the nihilistic doctrines they have encountered—it confirms Faust's disbelief in the possibility of spiritual fulfilment.

Consequently, Faust is trapped by disillusionment, as Schiller's savage is trapped by ignorance, within the confines of the mundane. His pact with Mephistopheles reveals

³⁶ Goethe, 1987: 25-27 (Part One, Sc. 4, lines 652-807).

³⁷ Goethe, 1987: 42 (Part One, Sc. 4, line 1338).

that he has given up all hope of “transcendence,” for it shows that he has no concern whatever for his fate beyond this world, and turns it over to the devil without hesitation: “Out of this earth all my contentment springs, / This sun shines on my sufferings.”³⁸ Schiller—in his optimistic post-Kantian phase—would say he ought to have left behind the world of sense before he pursued the spiritual, and that his failure to do so is responsible for his disappointment and despair. Faust would reply that he is unable to do so, because there is no higher world in which he can subsist and be satisfied; he is constitutionally unable to transcend his human limitations, and is rebuked by the Earth Spirit when he attempts vainly to do so. In this way *Faust* illustrates the problem of nihilism, the threat looming over the Enlightenment, the dark side of its humanism, rationalism, empiricism and materialism.

4.3. Faust’s Caprice

After the wager with Mephistopheles—in which Faust bets his soul that nothing in the world can satisfy his idealism, thereby confirming himself as a “principled nihilist”—Faust becomes recognizably *capricious* in the *Sturm und Drang* fashion. His longing for “the infinite,” the Absolute, having been frustrated, is transmuted into an infinite longing for finite things, just as predicted by Schiller’s theory of the philosophically frustrated savage, appropriately generalized: as we know, Faust is really in the same position as such savages because he feels himself to be tethered to the same material world in which the savage is bound by ignorance. Faust’s caprice is described especially in the following lines—Mephistopheles has just promised every kind of pleasure, knowing that Faust has no interest in pleasure per se, thereby goading him into a more extreme kind of libertinism, indifferent to pleasure and pain, concerned only with the quantity of experience and activity—

³⁸ Goethe, 1987: 51 (Part One, Sc. 4, lines 1663-1664). This statement may be compared with Ivan Karamazov’s refusal to countenance a “non-Euclidian,” anti-humanistic solution to the problem of evil; like Faust, he will not accept heavenly bliss as compensation for the deficiency that he cannot help, as a limited human being, perceiving in the sublunary world (Dostoevsky, 2003(d): 318-320).

I tell you, the mere pleasure's not the point!
To dizzying, painful joy I dedicate
Myself, to refreshing frustration, loving hate!
I've purged the lust for knowledge from my soul;
Now the full range of suffering it shall face,
And in my inner self I will embrace
The experience allotted to the whole
Race of mankind; my mind shall grasp the heights
And depths, my heart know all their sorrows and delights.³⁹

This seems to be exactly what Schiller has in mind when he refers to the savage's "demand to give his own individuality unlimited extension."³⁶ Faust wishes to bring everything into the compass of his own will; to enjoy completely unlimited access to the material world.

This infinite restlessness is also something like the desire of Klinger's Wild who, as we saw, wanted to have himself "stretched over a drum so as to take on new dimensions" and then be fired out of a pistol.⁴⁰ It is "throwing the reins on the horse's neck," as Lewes put it, and demanding that every whim of the idealist's indomitable will be indulged.⁴¹ Mephistopheles is the instrument by which this caprice is supposed to be exercised. He warns Faust that his ambition is nevertheless futile, and suitable only to a God. Of course, a limited mortal cannot encompass infinite experience; this new striving is just as unfulfillable as his prior striving for the transcendent infinite. Mephistopheles knows this veiled provocation will only spur Faust on. Sure enough, Faust cries: "I swear I'll achieve it!" Mephistopheles then flatters him and offers his services as guide; from here they go on various adventures apparently designed to grate against Faust's exalted sensibilities, and reduce him further to despair.

It is worth emphasizing that I regard Faust's Mephistophelean phase as *Sturm und Drang* caprice, rather than as a continuation or reorientation of his idealism, as some scholars have thought. Alexander Gillies, for example, thought that Faust's worldly

³⁹ Goethe, 1987: 54 (Part One, Sc. 7, lines 1765-1773).

⁴⁰ Klinger, 1992: 127f.

⁴¹ Lewes, 1908: 154.

striving was a straightforward continuation of his “titanism,” the same megalomania that led him to strive, at the beginning of the play, away from the human sphere and into the spiritual.⁴² According to Jane Brown’s more nuanced interpretation, Faust’s idealism does not dissipate after his disillusionment, but, retaining its general orientation towards spiritual fulfilment in “the Absolute,” merely changes form: “After the earth spirit scene,” she writes, “the focus of striving shifts openly from gnosis to mediated knowledge of the Absolute through activity in the world.”⁴³ Whilst I agree with Brown that Faust comes to place emphasis on “Nature over the transcendent Absolute,”⁴⁴ insofar as he determines to live in and for the material world rather than attempt to breach the spiritual, I think it important to recognize that his worldly striving represents a complete break with his former idealistic striving—he has renounced knowledge of the Absolute, mediated or otherwise, and dedicated himself to base materialism.

Citing the heavenly chorus that appears to Faust in his despair, Brown points out that the striving of Faust’s idealism ought really to be satisfied within nature, rather than in transcendence over it. Plausibly, this is true and the chorus does reveal to Faust that he ought to seek spiritual satisfaction in “mediated knowledge of the Absolute through activity in the world,” as Brown claims;⁴⁵ but the central challenge he faces is, I think, precisely to reorient his striving in this direction. There is little indication that this is what he is in fact doing when he dedicates himself to “dizzying, painful joy” and “refreshing frustration,” having “purged the lust for knowledge from [his] soul.”⁴⁶ Galivanting about with Mephistopheles, performing magic tricks in taverns and cavorting with talking apes and witches, is manifestly not what the heavenly chorus had in mind for Faust. His turn towards the material world is not only a turn away from his former “idealism of transcendence,” it is a rejection of idealism

⁴² Gillies, 1957: 54f.

⁴³ Brown, 1986: 57.

⁴⁴ Brown, 1986: 57.

⁴⁵ This would give *Faust* a distinctly German Idealist flavour; see Chapter 8, Section 4, below.

⁴⁶ Goethe, 1987: 54 (Part One, Sc. 7, lines 1766-1768).

altogether—it is an embracing of everything low and base, not with a view to discovering the divine within the worldly, but with a view to exerting and indulging the blind force of his will. Faust's turn towards the material world is, if anything, life-denying rather than life-affirming in any wholesome, natural, or uplifting sense. The kind of experience Mephistopheles promises him is nothing but self-indulgent, wanton abandonment, and appeals only to his caprice.

That being said, there is also a strong sense in which Faust's worldly striving is no less "transcendent" than his first phase of gnostic striving, even though it is no longer idealistic. Though Brown is right that he no longer wishes to transcend the sensory realm in some spiritual capacity, he nevertheless wants to transcend the ordinary human perspective in a different way—laterally rather than vertically, so to speak. Whereas he initially strove to unlock a sphere of knowledge inaccessible to human nature, he now demands to know the "experience allotted to the whole / Race of mankind," which is plainly more than can ever be allotted to any one human individual; this is a task no less superhuman than to commune with the Earth Spirit. In sum we may say that Faust, despite his turn towards the material world, has not taken the advice of the heavenly chorus at all; he has not turned to the natural world as a source of spiritual fulfilment, but as an infinite playground for his whims; and he has not given up his urge to transcend humanity, though he has given up his idealism.

Faust's caprice stems from the same wellspring of energy that inclined him towards the transcendent absolute before he was disillusioned. We saw that the power of Karl's heroic idealism is not dissipated but *redirected* by disillusionment: his energy and strength of will is diverted from the ideal of justice towards the experience of untrammelled freedom. Mephistopheles depends upon the same phenomenon occurring in Faust, knowing that the energy of his "ever striving mind" will not rest content in a state of disappointment, but will force its way out, like a dammed river, in manifold other directions. This happens in accordance with Schiller's bipartite division of the mind into "drives": the form drive being frustrated and blocked in its own domain, it doubles back and overloads the sense drive; the urge to comprehend the ideal—to

experience the infinite—is redirected towards the real—the finite—and becomes an unfulfillable urge for absolute dominion over the sensory world.⁴⁷

* * *

In conclusion, Faust's development in the early scenes of the play perfectly illustrates the implications I have drawn from Schiller's reflections on the "savage" and the modern idealist, and in this way sheds light on the psychology of the Underground Man—it allows us to make concrete sense of Schiller's theoretical views and apply them to the reading of Dostoevsky. Starting out as an idealist with no regard for the limits of human nature, and no checks on the extravagance of his aspirations, Faust strays from the path of reason and morality and forms the hopeless, vaguely specified ideal of "gnosis." This ideal is a product of "the unbridled capriciousness of fantasy"⁴⁸ and dreams "passing beyond possibility itself"⁴⁹—like most of the ideals of a modern sentimental idealist, it is therefore unrealizable, and in dedicating his life to it Faust is ensuring his eventual disillusionment. This disillusionment dawns gradually on Faust but reaches its nadir when he fails to court the attention of the Earth Spirit, and comes to think that his idealism was misguided; Mephistopheles appears and confirms him in this nihilistic worldview. After this point, Faust becomes capricious and employs Mephistopheles to satisfy his craving for completely unlimited freedom. He becomes capricious because of the combination of two factors: first, his ideal is a false one that is inappropriate for human life, and second, his conception of reality has been debased by a life of scientific failures and by the nihilism of Mephistopheles. A wayward idealism coupled with a heightened awareness of the intractability of reality guarantee that Faust becomes disillusioned and, as Schiller's theory of the savage

⁴⁷ Schiller, 1993: 159f.

⁴⁸ Schiller, 1993: 243.

⁴⁹ Schiller, 1993: 240.

predicts, seeks to vent the frustration of his spiritual freedom in and upon the material world. In all of these respects the Underground Man is a direct descendent of Faust.⁵⁰

5. The False Idealist

Above, we considered Schiller's theory of the transition from savagery to civilization, and recognized in it a possible explanation for the wilfulness and caprice of disillusioned idealists like Karl Moor, Faust and the Underground Man. We then saw how this explanation, though concealed in a somewhat obscure corner of Schiller's theoretical work, can be rediscovered, revealed and illuminated in the literary works that came before it. Though the dangers of sentimental idealism, and the predilection for disillusionment and despairing caprice among modern idealists, were less salient to Schiller in his post-Kantian phase, he found them extremely pressing in his youth and embodied them—along with other *Stürmer und Dränger* like Goethe—in the heroes of his early plays. And they were not entirely forgotten; these dangers find their philosophical apotheosis in Schiller's closing vision, in *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry*, of

⁵⁰ As stated above, I do not pretend to have covered more than one aspect of the first part of *Faust*; though the theme of disillusioned idealism is undoubtedly one central theme, there are others that are equally salient. In particular, I have not even mentioned Faust's relationship with Gretchen, the humble young woman he falls in love with after drinking a tonic procured by Mephistopheles in order to reinvigorate Faust's flagging capacities for sensual enjoyment (Goethe, 1987: 81f. (Part One, Sc. 9-10, lines 2600-2626)). It is not immediately clear whether the Gretchen theme can or indeed should be accommodated to the theme of Faust's "idealism of transcendence." If Mephistopheles is trying to drag Faust "through life's wastes" in order to deprive him of spiritual sustenance, why allow him to fall in love with such a woman? In fact, I think, Mephistopheles can expect one of two outcomes from the Gretchen affair, both of which are to his benefit: either it will end well for the couple and Faust will be truly contented, in which case he loses the wager and Mephistopheles can claim his soul; or—more plausibly, and as in fact happens—it will end badly and Faust will fall deeper into despair, having found that the most perfect worldly ideal of romantic love is also fleeting and chimerical. In the end, however, it does turn out to have been a mistake for Mephistopheles—as may be expected of a power who wills evil, but unwittingly serves good (Goethe, 1987: 42 (Part One, Sc. 6, lines 1336-1337))—since Faust's soul is apparently drawn heavenwards by the "eternal feminine" to be reunited with Gretchen's (Goethe, 1994: 238f. (Part Two, Act 5, Sc. 22-23)).

what he calls the “false idealist.” It is here, in the final paragraph of Schiller’s essay, that he draws a portrait fit not only for the wayward anti-heroes of the *Sturm und Drang* that he must have had in mind, but, as readers of Dostoevsky will see right away, of the Underground Man as well. I quote the whole description, and consider its implications below:

Whereas the effects of true idealism are, by contrast [to those of realism], uncertain and often dangerous, those of false idealism are terrifying. The true idealist takes leave of nature and experience only because he does not discover there what reason obliges him to strive for: what is immutable and unconditionally necessary. Out of sheer arbitrariness the visionary [i.e. false idealist] takes leave of nature in order to be able to indulge his self-absorption in desires and the whims of his imagination all the more wantonly. He puts his freedom, not in being independent of physical constraints, but in being released from moral ones. Thus the visionary does not merely deny the human character—he denies all character, he is utterly lawless, hence he is nothing and is also good for nothing. Precisely because this fantasy is a deviation, not from nature, but from freedom, because it thus springs from a disposition in itself worthy of respect and infinitely perfectible, it also leads to an infinite fall into a bottomless depth and can only end in complete annihilation.⁵¹

Schiller attributes this false idealism to “sheer arbitrariness”; it is thus a kind of idealism only insofar as it abandons reality in favour of products of the imagination, and not because it is directed towards what he would consider a genuine ideal, sanctioned by pure reason. But even though Schiller implies that false idealists corrupt themselves wilfully, through indulging gratuitously in their intellectual freedom rather than using it to serve the needs of reason, his awareness of the precariousness of modern sentimentalism and idealism more generally suggests that false idealism should be a broader problem.

When the waywardness of idealism is coupled with the influence of nihilism, the problem of the false idealist takes on new significance; quite apart from the dubious

⁵¹ Schiller, 1993: 259f.

moral and intellectual value of his “utterly lawless” imaginings, the very extravagance of his ideals exacerbates the problem of caprice; accustomed to the wildest intellectual libertinism, the false idealist must be all the less able to countenance the limitations of reality. This is precisely what happens in the case of Faust. Thus the modern idealist is liable to end up in a worse state of capriciousness than the savage, because he is all the more unable to exercise his absolute intellectual freedom in a meaningful and satisfactory way. Even though, unlike the savage, the modern idealist is perfectly capable of abstracting from reality, he is nevertheless incapable of satisfying his spiritual needs because, as a victim of modern ideas, he believes that the transcendent ideals he strives for — whether they are moral or epistemic, chivalric or “gnostic” — are mere fantasies. These modern ideas may influence characters directly, as in *The Robbers* and *Notes from Underground*, or may be represented concretely in their experiences, as in *Faust*. In all cases, the idealist is led to think of the world as a cold and inhospitable environment that robs human beings of their spiritual dignity. As we have seen, during the Enlightenment this was a pressing issue, because modern science was eroding confidence in the reality of anything beyond the merely animal and material: for intellectuals at the end of the eighteenth century, the real world was not seen as a suitable arena for the realization of their sentimental and romantic ideals, which emphasized human dignity as sublime transcendence over animal nature.

We have seen this illustrated in Karl Moor, in Faust, and in the case of the Underground Man himself, for whom, as Victor Terras says, life is “a loud and ugly dissonance between what man is trying to be and what he is.”⁵² On the one hand, he is a wayward “Schiller” and devotee of the “sublime and beautiful” aesthetics, with a robust sense of his own sublime transcendence over nature and of the way he and the world *ought to be*; on the other hand, he is rationally persuaded by the claims of the Nihilists, and believes that understands well the way the world *is*. And he is well aware that the way the world ought to be according to his extravagant idealism, and the way the world is according to his nihilism, are fundamentally irreconcilable: in

⁵² Terras, 1964: 90.

other words, he believes that his ideals are unrealizable. Further—as we saw in Chapter 5—he believes that the only “ideals” that *are realizable* in light of the findings of modern science, namely, those of the utopian socialists, are not ideals worthy of the name at all. The “crystal palace” of Chernyshevsky represents nothing more than the dreary utilitarianism of the tenement block; yet it may really be the best that human beings can hope to attain, given the (for him) bleak picture of reality painted by the Nihilists. This realization leaves the Underground Man frustrated and disillusioned, his noblest ideals acknowledged as fantasies, in the same straits as Schiller’s capricious “savages,” or, more precisely, the dangerous “false idealist” whose refusal to relinquish the absolute freedom of his fancies leads to the rejection of all limitations, real, rational, and moral.

6. Conclusion

Investigation of Schiller’s theoretical works and the plays of the *Sturm und Drang* was motivated by a concern to understand the complex and obscure relationship between the Underground Man’s most important psychological peculiarities: his stubborn idealism, his equally stubborn nihilism, and, finally, his caprice. It is the latter trait that makes him unfit for life in any harmonious, not to say utopian society; to understand it is thus to understand the most important premise of Dostoevsky’s social-philosophical polemic in *Notes from Underground*.

We have now arrived at an explanation of the Underground Man’s caprice, based on Schiller’s essays and comparisons with *The Robbers* and *Faust*. When the inherent tendency of idealism towards outlandish fantasies and “false idealism” is coupled with the disenchantment of reality by modern science, which is taken by nihilists to prove that the real world is utterly prosaic and natural, the fate of an idealist like the Underground Man is sealed. The likelihood of his ideals seeming to be strictly impossible is greatly increased because the more his understanding of reality is coloured by

reductive naturalism or nihilism, the more farfetched his ideals are likely to seem to him. In short, the modern idealist, left to his own devices, becomes attached to lofty ideals that, he later finds, are proved by natural science to be impossible. In just this way, his romanticism leads the Underground Man to strive for ideals which are in themselves farfetched, while his Nihilist intellectual authorities render them doubly so, by professing a conception of reality stripped of all traditional values—whether aesthetic, moral, religious—and thus totally inhospitable to anything a romantic idealist like himself might find worthy of respect.

The absolute freedom he experiences in thought, in the “realm of ideas,” when he is using his intellect and imagination to abstract from reality and to form ideals, is thus rendered worthless by the extent to which nihilism shows the ideals formed in this way to be unrealistic. This destruction of the idealist’s ideals implies the frustration of his absolute intellectual freedom, which finds the realm of ideas empty of all but misleading and fruitless fantasies. In this respect, the Underground Man is in the same situation of the savage described by Schiller, who has not gained access to the realm of ideas at all. In pursuit of their spiritual needs, they both expect to be able to exercise absolute freedom; but in the real world, they find that as human beings they are finitely powerful and cannot do so. Reality, of course, cannot possibly meet their needs, so they are perpetually frustrated. This then leads to a sense of limitation and constraint, which the Underground Man, like the savages, constantly battles against; he feels everything real as an intolerable limitation of his absolute freedom. He cannot bear the thought that when he has a toothache, he must see a dentist or he will continue to suffer; being beholden to the limitations of reality is juxtaposed painfully with the unlimited power he enjoys in the world of his fantasies.⁵³

Why should this explanation be taken seriously as an interpretation of *Notes from Underground*? First, because it is coherent and is supported by Dostoevsky’s text; second, because of the works from which it has been extrapolated—taken together, these

⁵³ Dostoevsky, 2001: 11.

works constitute a key to the Underground Man's caprice that Dostoevsky could plausibly have expected his readers to have internalized and have been able to draw upon in the interpretation of his novel. The Underground Man belongs to a tradition that had settled into the bedrock of Russian intellectual culture, and had exerted a formative influence on more than one generation of writers. Broadly speaking, the context to which Dostoevsky states the Underground Man belongs is, as Evgenia Cherkasova remarks, the age of "bitter disillusionment."⁵⁴ The spirit of this age was most forcefully expressed in the *Sturm und Drang* movement. In Russia, this tradition had mingled with other foreign influences—most notably, Byron, Schelling, Hegel, and later writers like Dickens, Balzac and George Sand—and taken on several new forms: Onegin, Pechorin, various Gogolian characters, Oblomov, Turgenev's "hamlets" and "superfluous men."⁵⁵ In *Notes from Underground*, I shall argue, Dostoevsky drew on all of these developments but returned much more decisively than ever before to their common ancestral seat, the German *Sturm und Drang* movement, with which, in its urgent and emotionally charged preoccupation with the problem of nihilism, he seemed to have a special affinity. In Chapters 8 and 9, I turn to consider this historical development more fully.

Having established the plausibility and suitability of this interpretation of the Underground Man, in Chapter 10 I shall then return to solve the original problem of understanding Dostoevsky's social-philosophical polemic in *Notes from Underground*.

⁵⁴ Dostoevsky, 2001: 3n. Cherkasova, 2009: 43.

⁵⁵ I'll say more about several of these writers and characters in the next chapters.

Chapter 8: The Spectre of Nihilism

1. Introduction

In the previous chapter we arrived at an explanation of the Underground Man's caprice that can be derived from the works of Schiller and his contemporaries. I suggested that Dostoevsky could plausibly have expected his audience, in light of the immense popularity of the works in question, to arrive at a similar understanding of the Underground Man; these works belonged to a common stock that most educated Russians of Dostoevsky's generation could recall and draw upon when prompted. In this chapter and the next, as stated, I shall explore this issue in more detail by way of an extended survey of philosophical and literary developments separating Dostoevsky from Schiller and the *Sturm und Drang*.

This survey is designed to address two main questions. First, to what extent *is* the Underground Man really a throwback to the *Sturm und Drang* movement *specifically*, as I have claimed? I have already observed that, despite certain crucial similarities pointed out in the last chapters, the Underground Man is in general a far cry from the heroes of Schiller and Goethe; generally speaking, as we shall see below, he has much more in common with the post-Byronic characters prevalent during the first half of the nineteenth century. I shall identify ideas and themes that Dostoevsky seems to have co-opted from his various predecessors in developing his novel. Without claiming to be anything like an exhaustive list of sources for *Notes from Underground*, this survey of influences will nevertheless serve an important role in the present investigation. Its purpose in this context is to reveal that there is at least one important theme that Dostoevsky could only have drawn from Schiller and Goethe directly, and not from more recent developments in the same tradition—namely, the association of disillusionment with caprice, which, as we shall see, has a strong claim to being peculiar

to the *Sturm und Drang* era. This will provide crucial justification for my claim that Dostoevsky refers specifically to heroes like Karl Moor and Faust in his characterization of the Underground Man's caprice, by throwing into relief the close ties between *Notes from Underground* and the *Sturm und Drang* works considered in preceding chapters, and thus justify the method of interpreting the *Notes* put forward above.

The second main question is the following: if the Underground Man is indeed such a close relative of Karl Moor and Faust, and a throwback to the *Sturm und Drang* in respect of his caprice, *why* did Dostoevsky establish this relationship? Why did Dostoevsky revive the *Sturm und Drang* association of disillusionment and caprice? I have already pointed out that the *Stürmer und Dränger*, like the Underground Man, were reacting against nihilism; at the end of the eighteenth century, the nihilistic implications of Enlightenment philosophy were hotly debated; and in Dostoevsky's day, the threat of nihilism was once again looming, this time with greater vehemence and self-assurance.¹ There is much more to be said on this front, however. The central historical observation I wish to make is that thinkers of Dostoevsky's generation stood—and typically saw themselves as standing—at the culmination of intellectual developments taking place over the preceding hundred or so years, primarily in Germany—namely, the rise and fall of the idealistic romanticism inspired by German Idealist philosophy. This philosophy developed in large part as a solution to the problem of nihilism, which—as we saw in Chapter 6—was perceived at the end of the eighteenth century to be the inevitable result of the Enlightenment's uncritical devotion to the power of reason. With the decline of German Idealism through the 1840s and 1850s, and then the emergence of Nihilism in the 1860s, Russian intellectuals were forced to grapple—as the *Stürmer und Dränger* had grappled before them—with the apparent impossibility of reconciling reason and faith, real and ideal, material nature and the special dignity of humanity. Through investigating this history of ideas, we gain a clearer sense—in answer to the question posed above—of why Dostoevsky

¹ Recall again that I am using “nihilism” to refer to the doctrine, and “Nihilism” to refer to the nineteenth-century Russian adherents of this doctrine.

might have struck upon themes developed by writers like Schiller and Goethe in his engagement with the resurgent forces of nihilism.

The second question is addressed first, in the remainder of this chapter, which concerns the development of German Idealism considered as a response to nihilism and the problem of human dignity. It concludes with the decline of this philosophy and the transition from romanticism to realism in literature, during which time Russian intellectuals became increasingly preoccupied with the phenomenon of disillusioned idealism. The first question is then addressed in Chapter 9, which is chiefly concerned with literary depictions of disillusionment after the *Sturm und Drang* period; it pursues the legacy of Byronism, which shaped the manner in which most Russian writers responded to the decline of German Idealism.² Chapter 9 concludes with the emergence of Nihilism in the 1860s, thereby arriving at the immediate context of *Notes from Underground* itself. I shall defer answering both questions explicitly until the end of Chapter 9. We shall then be in a position to judge the extent to which the dominant post-Byronic tradition can be distinguished from the *Sturm und Drang* in its understanding of disillusionment, and appreciate the extent to which Dostoevsky deviated, and why he did so, from the former and returned to the latter in his characterization of the *Underground Man*. In Chapter 10, I then synthesize the results of these historical sketches in order to illuminate the way in which Dostoevsky uses this revival of the *Sturm und Drang* theme of caprice as a response to the re-emergence of the problem that prompted it in the first place, namely, the threat of nihilism.

* * *

Some methodological clarifications are in order. First: all of the works to be considered are well-known and well-studied; I do not believe I have drawn any startling conclusions or attained original insights into them. That being said, I have deviated

² I have chosen to address the questions in this order because the philosophical developments described in the present chapter serve as a useful prelude to the literary developments considered in the next.

from standard histories in focusing my attention on the ideas developed in previous chapters—human dignity, spiritual needs, idealism, disillusionment—and in granting philosophical and literary works equal weight as means of grappling with these ideas. Second: given the large number of works under consideration, the following survey is necessarily limited in scope and depth; it is intended only to deliver a representative sample of some of the most important (relative to our present interests) literary and philosophical developments, and to examine them in detail sufficient only for present purposes.³ For the same reason, I have abstracted almost entirely from the economic and political developments which were occurring during the period of time under consideration—namely, the French and Industrial Revolutions, along with their various repercussions—despite the fact that these developments naturally exercised considerable influence over literature and philosophy.⁴ Third: this is not an “influence study” in the sense of an enquiry into *which* writers and thinkers influenced Dostoevsky; I take for granted that he was familiar with all the literary works under consideration. As for the more theoretical works—I assume on the contrary that the *details* of most, at least, were unknown to him.⁵ I am interested in all of

³ Of course, there are no hard and fast rules for deciding what to include in such a survey. According to intellectual historian Stefan Collini: “‘context’ is never something given, never one fixed range of neighbouring activities: what can fruitfully count as context will depend on what we already understand about the text which we are choosing to surround with other elements, what questions we are seeking to answer or puzzles to resolve. Anything that helps to make or restore sense may be seen as an essential context, but there will necessarily be a plurality of such framing moves, always involving a selection from the almost limitless residues of the past. We like to think that the judicious selection of context is what helps protect us from misinterpreting what we read, and so it does in the best cases. But there can be no recipe for calling such contexts into play: the journeying between past and present which is constitutive of the historian’s activity includes an increasing familiarity with the mental worlds to be found at either end of those journeys, but the judgement about what needs explaining, what needs saying, is, like other forms of practical judgement, something built up by experience, not arrived at by applying a template” (Collini, 2006: 29f.).

⁴ For a more inclusive approach, see Hobsbawm, 1962.

⁵ Dostoevsky’s philosophical education was limited, and largely second-hand. He was amused when Strakhov pointed out the commonalities between his views and those of various Western philosophers, wondering at how difficult it was to think up original ideas; and, though he requested philosophical works be sent to him during his period of Siberian exile, Strakhov reports that his volume of Hegel remained uncut (Clowes, 2004: 84-86; Frank, 1986: 42). Nevertheless, he was surely familiar with the general philosophical issues to be

these works not insofar as they may or may not have directly influenced Dostoevsky, but because they illuminate the traditions of philosophy and literature to which *Notes from Underground* makes a polemical contribution, both as a new development of the “Hamlet” and “superfluous man” traditions and, more importantly, as an answer to Chernyshevsky and the rise of Nihilist utopian socialism.

2. The Counter-Enlightenment and The Pantheism Controversy

In Chapter 6 we considered the *Sturm und Drang* reaction to the rationalistic optimism of the Enlightenment, which Schiller portrayed as corrupting the morals of Franz Moor and provoking open rebellion in the more traditional Karl. But this was neither the beginning nor the end of counter-Enlightenment reaction: the idea that reason should be granted unlimited authority had always been perceived as naive or outright dangerous by various reactionaries and conservatives.⁶

Such dissenting voices notwithstanding, many Enlightenment philosophers proceeded apace in the assurance that their rationalism was entirely benign, and that whatever spiritual needs human beings may have could be satisfied without recourse to irrational faith or traditional religious authorities. Ironically, Voltaire doubted whether philosophy would ever create much of a fuss, for good or for ill: “All the Works of the modern Philosophers put together will never make so much Noise as even the Dispute which arose among the *Franciscans*, merely about the Fashion of their Sleeves and of their Cowls.”⁷ Religion needed no special protection. In any case, though it was often admitted that society—and in particular the uneducated

considered below: as Frank remarks, “no one who had actively participated in the ideological debates of the 1840s in Russia, and had mulled over the pages of Belinsky and Herzen, could have helped acquiring a fairly wide acquaintance with the reigning philosophical ideas of the time” (Frank, 1986: 42).

⁶ McMahon, 2002: 68; Garrard, 2006.

⁷ Voltaire, 1994: 60.

masses—required some kind of religion to protect political and moral stability, it was thought that reason sanctioned a limited deism capable of performing this role just as well as the existing church, and without spreading the latter’s corruption and superstition.

Belief in the compatibility of reason and faith was indeed part of the foundations of the Enlightenment, as in the works of Descartes, of Newton, or of Francis Bacon, who commented that “I had rather believe all the fables in the Legend, and the Talmud, and the Alcoran, than that this universal frame is without a mind; and, therefore, God never wrought a miracle to convince atheism, because his ordinary works convince it.”⁸ For such thinkers, true science was indeed a far more reliable defender of faith than was superstition: through revealing the perfection of creation, science revealed the existence and perfection of the creator. Bacon found it incredible that “an army of infinite small portions, or seeds unplaced, should have produced this order and beauty without a divine marshal,” and thus that “atheism is rather in the lip than in the heart of man”—no sane and educated person could honestly believe it.⁹

As we saw in Chapter 6, this trust in the compatibility of science and faith came increasingly under attack, and even progressive Enlightenment philosophers began to worry that reason could not on its own sustain the religious, moral and political foundations of European civilization. Hume advised his readers to simply abstain from venturing into metaphysical enquiries that, he argued, could only lead to scepticism—“so boundless an ocean of doubt, uncertainty, and contradiction!”¹⁰ Although atheism was openly championed by the more radical philosophers, such as the Baron d’Holbach, most were somewhat more cautious about dispensing with religion altogether. Rousseau’s *Contrat Social* remarks on the necessity of a state religion to maintain social cohesion, and Voltaire’s quip that “if God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him” attained proverbial status.¹¹ The philosophers of the German

⁸ Bacon, 1902: 43.

⁹ Bacon, 1902: 44.

¹⁰ Hume, 1993: 69.

¹¹ Rousseau, 1987: 220-227 (Book IV, Ch. VIII).

Enlightenment were generally even less inclined towards outright nihilism than their French counterparts (though this may in part have been because of stricter political control and censorship).¹² Fearing the total collapse of religion and everything that rested upon it, as the eighteenth century came to a close German philosophers tackled “a single fundamental problem” that Frederick Beiser refers to as the problem of “the authority of reason.”¹³ Should reason have the authority to criticize the foundations of religion and morality, regardless of the outcome—even if it completely destroys these foundations and violently overturns the social order? Do we therefore have to choose between reason and blind faith? Give reason complete authority or give it none at all? Neither alternative was satisfying: “Isolated sensibility, feeling without reason, and blind faith pull inexorably toward fanaticism; isolated reason, cold speculation, and the unrestricted desire to know lead at best to icy, carping, inactive deism.”¹⁴ Along with the French Revolution, the crisis of reason’s authority had a massive impact on the development of German philosophers coming to intellectual maturity in the 1880s and 1890s.¹⁵ Thus this problem continued to hold the attention of philosophers well into the nineteenth century, even though, after Kant, Reinhold and their followers (to be considered below), they were much more optimistic about having solved it or being about to solve it; thus Beiser writes that the “chief aim” of Hegel’s philosophy, which dominated the early nineteenth century, was to solve the problem posed by the pantheism controversy.¹⁶

¹² Beiser, 1992: 8. Kant’s most thorough attempt at harmonizing Christianity and philosophy, his *Religion Within the Bounds of Bare Reason*, led to his being forbidden to write on religious subjects (Kant, 2009: xviii).

¹³ Beiser, 1987: 1. See also Pinkard, 2002: 90ff.

¹⁴ Reinhold, 2005: 46.

¹⁵ See, e.g., Pinkard, 2000: 30f.

¹⁶ Beiser, 2014: 54. According to Terry Pinkard, Hegel’s famous *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) grapples directly with “the spiritual crisis over whether the modern authority of reason was itself sustainable or was itself simply too empty and arid to produce anything worthy of full allegiance” and attempts to move beyond the failure of “the various attempts of European life to shore up its normative commitments in the early modern period by reliance either on reason itself or something else beyond reason that would somehow ‘ground’ and reassure reason about itself” (Pinkard, 2000: 208, 209).

The problems of nihilism and the authority of reason came most forcefully to the attention of philosophers in Germany with the “pantheism controversy,” which erupted out of Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi’s claim that the late Gotthold Ephraim Lessing had, in private, admitted to being a Spinozist. This was far more than a piece of slanderous gossip. Lessing had been a stalwart of the German Enlightenment, and Spinozism encapsulated the worst anxieties of many of his admirers. Spinozism—which, as a form of pantheism, equated God with the world and also viewed the world in purely mechanistic terms—was then equated with atheism and the denial of free will; it was thus a form of what Jacobi branded “nihilism,” in that it apparently undermined the basis of traditional philosophical, moral, religious and political values.¹⁷ Spinozism loomed darkly over the Enlightenment as a warning against the corrosive potential of rationalism; all who cherished—or wanted to be seen to cherish—traditional morals and religion worried that Spinozism might be lurking as an unwanted implication in the wings of their favourite philosophical systems.¹⁸ Jacobi argued that Spinozism was indeed the logical conclusion of Enlightenment rationalism, and publicized Lessing’s confession in the knowledge that it would embarrass those who hoped otherwise. This is in fact what happened. Many resisted Jacobi’s claim that all rational philosophy leads to nihilism, but agreed it was the main threat to modern thought; thus the defenders of reason were forced to enter into debate with Jacobi. The philosopher Moses Mendelssohn, an indignant friend of Lessing, was foremost among these, though his opposition to Jacobi was widely regarded as inadequate. What’s more, anxious to submit his rejoinder to the press, Mendelssohn rushed into the street without adequate protection from the elements, caught a chill and died shortly after. In the eyes of the public it was as if he had been “killed” by

¹⁷ Although he gives the word a primarily theoretical significance, designating the view that metaphysical knowledge is impossible, Jacobi’s “nihilism” is not merely epistemological, but ethical and religious because he believed that theory and practice were linked: nihilism in the realm of metaphysics would undermine the basis of morality. As Beiser notes, “Jacobi’s use of the word provides all the stuff for the fiction of a Dostoevsky” (Beiser, 1987: 82).

¹⁸ “It is remarkable how many important philosophers of the past have come to think: ‘If my own philosophy were to be rejected, the only alternative would be Spinozism’” (Garret, 2012: 248).

Jacobi's assault on his ideals; and it "was not only Mendelssohn, but the *Aufklärung* [German Enlightenment] itself that had died."¹⁹ The belief in the compatibility of faith and reason that had sustained the Enlightenment since its inception was permanently shaken.

As we have seen above, moreover, the question of whether or not reason is compatible with faith is at the same time a question about whether, considered rationally, humanity can claim to be elevated above the rest of nature in any significant respect, better *in kind* and not merely *by degree*, more *noble* and not merely more intelligent; the pantheism controversy can thus be understood as a dispute about whether or not reason undermines *human dignity*. As Bacon had warned at the outset of the Enlightenment: "They that deny a God destroy a man's nobility; for certainly man is of kin to the beasts by his body; and, if he be not of kin to God by his spirit, he is a base and ignoble creature."²⁰ To say that God's existence, and therefore the divine aspect of humanity itself, cannot be supported by rational philosophy is to say in effect that reason undermines human dignity and displaces all of the values that lend nobility to its own aspirations. As Jacobi wrote in his 1785 *Letters Concerning the Doctrine of Spinoza*, the spark of the pantheism controversy:

Reason that has fallen into poverty and become speculative, or in other words, *degenerate* reason, [...] must drag itself here and there, looking for a truth that left when the contemplative understanding left, for religion and its goods—just as morality must do, looking for virtuous inclinations that have disappeared; and laws must also, looking for the fallen public spirit and the better customs; pedagogy. . . . Let me interrupt here, that I be not swept off my feet by the flood coming my way.²¹

Jacobi predicts that the true meaning of every aspect of human life will be swept away by the "flood" of nihilism, and that, having thus destroyed all the highest objects of their striving, philosophy and science will be forced to confront the depleted and

¹⁹ Beiser, 1987: 74.

²⁰ Bacon, 1902: 45.

²¹ Jacobi, 2009: 232. Cf. Herder, 2004: 30f.

colourless picture of reality that they have themselves created, in which human beings are nothing but machines. Certain of the *philosophes*, as we have seen, were ready to accept this consequence; Jacobi's audience was on the whole far less willing, and feared not only for human dignity but for the very fabric of the social order. Such fears were naturally lent new impetus by the French Revolution, which was then looming and soon to erupt.²²

Jacobi's own solution to the problem was religious: forced to choose between reason and faith, he embraced a non-rational faith in the incomprehensible divinity,²³ arguing that human dignity consists not at all in reason—which reduces everything to the humanly comprehensible and thereby actively *debases it*—but in the fact that human beings have been created by something so high above them that they cannot comprehend it. “With irresistible commanding force,” he wrote, “the highest in me directs to an All-highest outside and above me; it compels me to believe in the incomprehensible, yea in what is conceptually *impossible*, within me and outside me, from love, through love.”²⁴ Incomprehensibility becomes for Jacobi a necessary (but not, of course, sufficient) criterion of divinity: anything that can be rationally understood is by the same token unworthy of our highest esteem.²⁵ In this he followed the great

²² Beiser, 1992: 2.

²³ Jacobi's prioritization of faith over reason calls to mind one of Dostoevsky's statements about religion. In a famous letter to N. D. Fonvizina, Dostoevsky states that if he was forced to choose between Christ and “the truth,” he would choose the former (Dostoevsky, 1987: 68). As Scanlan notes, however, this should not be taken, as it often is, as a statement of irrationalism—for one thing, Dostoevsky does not here state that he *is* forced to make this choice, only that he would choose Christ if he had to (Scanlan, 2002: 7). Thus it seems that Dostoevsky is not as pessimistic as Jacobi about the conflict between reason and faith (more on this in Chapter 10, where I argue that Dostoevsky does not think that Christianity is unreasonable or unrealistic).

²⁴ Jacobi, 2009: 515.

²⁵ Thus he proclaims with great passion that if the natural world were everything science finds it to be, and nothing more, then it would not be worthy of existence: “Just as this world of appearances, if it had all its truth in the appearances and no deeper meaning, if it had nothing to reveal apart from them, would become a ghastly phantom before which I would curse the consciousness where this horror has its genesis, and would call down Annihilation upon it like a Divinity,”—here I am reminded of the rhetoric of Karl Moor—“so too everything that I called good, beautiful, and holy, would become for me a non-entity that shatters my spirit and

counter-Enlightenment philosopher and grandfather of the *Sturm und Drang* and romantic movements, Johann Gottfried Herder: "How miserably small it would have to be if I, a fly, could see it all!"²⁶ Jacobi finds confirmation of human dignity in humbling his rationality by means of faith in a perfection he cannot comprehend.

In spite of his religiosity, Jacobi's striking anti-rationalism puts him in sympathy, if not agreement, with more committed *Stürmer und Dränger*. The title character of his 1776 epistolary novel *Allwill* is a romantic young man reminiscent of Goethe's Werther (with the addition of a rakish mystique that anticipates Byron). Like the other heroes of the *Sturm und Drang*, he refuses to compromise his ideals or reconcile himself with the limitations of reality; he too is willing to sacrifice his "normal advantage" on the altar of his ideals. "Whoever reconciles himself on this earth of ours to a lasting peace of mind," he says, "and can taste in it the fulfilment of his wishes, cannot be carrying a *heart* in his chest, but only a pump to spurt blood through his veins. — And that man is supposed to be *happy*—happy *above everybody else*?"²⁷ He spurns the nihilist conception of happiness—the same utilitarian conception advocated by the likes of d'Holbach and Chernyshevsky and attacked by the Underground Man—which considers human beings only in their material aspect, and does not take their higher aspirations into account. "The system of happiness," he scoffs, "this is how they call what they want to teach us—the highest pleasure of mankind; what that is, they know for every possible circumstance; they have in view the harmony of all needs, the measure of every human power in the soul."²⁸ Such scientific approaches to human happiness are radically defective; he would fully endorse the Underground Man's comparison of Chernyshevsky's "Crystal Palace" to a chicken coop.

tears the heart out of my breast, the moment I accept that it exists without connection in me to a higher and *true* Being, without being in me only *symbol* and *image* of this Being; if all that I have in me is only empty consciousness and *poesy*" (Jacobi, 2009: 515).

²⁶ Herder, 2004: 96.

²⁷ Jacobi, 2009: 467.

²⁸ Jacobi, 2009: 469.

Jacobi no doubt sympathizes with his hero's disillusionment, but regards his response to nihilism as immature. Allwill senses that reason leads to nihilism, and so rejects rationalism; but he puts nothing in its place, and attempts to live without constraints, without "form" of any kind. (In German as in English, his very name implies a lack of restraint.) Thus Allwill is rebuked for his *Sturm und Drang* intellectual libertinism or "butterfly philosophy," and advised to give order and regularity to his aspirations:

The butterfly philosophy of people like you would gladly see anything called "form" banished. Everything ought to happen freehand; the human soul ought to build *itself* up into everything good and beautiful—by *itself*; and you people do not stop to think that the human character is like a liquid matter that cannot have *shape and permanence* except in a receptacle; and so it never once comes into your heads to consider that *pure* water in a glass is of more use than nectar poured on mud.²⁹

Without by any means agreeing with the nihilists that humans ought to limit their aspirations to a merely animal happiness, Jacobi nevertheless asks the idealistic youth to reign in their enthusiasm. They needn't accept the degrading "form" offered to them by nihilists—the materialistic calculations of utilitarianism—but they must accept a *different* kind of "shape and permanence," namely the constraints of morality and good sense, lest the "nectar" of their exalted minds be dissipated in directionless striving, as indeed happened in the case of the heroes of the *Sturm und Drang*.³⁰ Here Jacobi is illustrating the need for *Bildung*, the intellectual, moral and aesthetic refinement of character lacked by impetuous romantics like Allwill.

Jacobi's proposed solution to the problem of nihilism is especially interesting to consider here in that it marks a direct critique of the *Sturm und Drang* reaction to nihilism that Jacobi embodies in Allwill. As we shall see below, the "butterfly philosophy" of caprice did indeed give way to a philosophy of harmony, but not precisely in the purely religious direction that Jacobi espoused. Instead, it was a new philosophical

²⁹ Jacobi, 2009: 479.

³⁰ Jacobi would seem to be in agreement with Kant that "nothing—not even the greatest absurdity—can continue to operate for long without some kind of law" (Kant, 1991: 247).

movement, and a reconceptualization of the role to be played by reason in philosophy, that—for its proponents—ushered in a culture of refinement, balance and *Bildung*, solved the problem of nihilism, and put a stop to the raging of *Sturm und Drang*.

3. Kant and Reinhold

As we have seen, Jacobi defended faith against what he took to be the vain pretensions of reason. Understood as a problem for human dignity, however, the pantheism controversy could not end in Jacobi's favour as a triumph of faith over rationalism. Reason, for the Enlightenment, *was* a large part of what made human beings special—is it acceptable that it could be incompatible with the other parts, morality and religion? The necessity of choosing between reason and faith was itself offensive to human dignity. It is on this point that Jacobi diverged from the *Stürmer und Dränger*: following the advice of David Hume, he was willing to ignore the demands of reason—unlike, for instance, Karl Moor, who could not simply dismiss the “modern scribbling philosophers” even though he despised them, because he believed that he could not refute them. Jacobi's anti-rationalism meant that he was, to a great extent, unable to appease the spirit of the age, which would not back down from reason even if it hesitated to fully embrace it. It was all very well to chastise Allwill for his “butterfly philosophy” that prefers complete “formlessness” to any kind of limitation; Jacobi failed to appreciate the extent to which the only “form” available to a modern intellectual was nihilistic rationalism, because all of the others—morals, religion, taste etc.—had already been undermined by it. Jacobi was all too successful in convincing his readers that rationalism would lead to all-consuming nihilism unless it was rejected; but he underestimated the compulsion of rationalism—he failed to see that “you can't object, it's two times two makes four!”

As such, many modern intellectuals like Allwill—or Karl Moor, or Faust, or the Underground man—could not be fully satisfied by the anti-rational, religious brand of

Bildung that Jacobi advocated as a means of restoring human dignity in the wake of the Enlightenment. For such people, a workable solution would have to take one general form: a reconciliation of reason and faith that was acceptable to both, that neither offended the intellectual sensibilities of a modern intellectual, nor threatened the validity of humanity's higher aspirations. Jacobi failed to appease the former. It remained for another philosopher to resolve—at least for a time—and despite Jacobi's protestations—the tension between reason and faith without denying either the respect due to it.

This was Kant, as popularized by Karl Leonard Reinhold, who presented Kant's philosophy for popular consumption as a remedy for the pantheism controversy. Like many of his contemporaries, Reinhold was deeply troubled by the threat of nihilism described by Jacobi; he worried that reason, in the guise of modern Enlightenment thought, would undermine religion and morals, robbing humanity of its dignity and destroying the whole basis of social cohesion.³¹ At the end of the eighteenth century, as Reinhold evocatively described it in his *Letters on the Kantian Philosophy* (serialized 1786-1787, expanded as a monograph in 1790 and 1792), morality and religion were subject to a "shaking," a universal controversy which threatened to result in the total destabilization of what he regarded as traditional European culture.³² This shaking was understood by Reinhold to be the natural conclusion of the Enlightenment and—more remotely—the Reformation, which for him liberated reason from the dominion of Roman Catholic authority, and made it the final arbiter of all scientific, moral and religious matters.³³ In Reinhold's day, as he saw it, the field was divided among those

³¹ "He believes, not without concern, that he has observed the state of our scientific and scholarly culture being determined by an ever-expanding quest for graspable objects, the limited enthusiasm of the nation for her poets and philosophers visibly decreasing, morality being degraded more and more widely to self-interested cleverness by teachers of morality, and the rights of humanity being explained by legal authorities more and more expressly in terms of the advantage they offer to a particular state" (Reinhold, 2005: 126).

³² Reinhold, 2005: 131: "The most striking and characteristic feature of the spirit of our age is a *shaking* of all previously known systems, theories, and manners of representation, a shaking whose range and depth is unprecedented in the history of the human spirit."

³³ Reinhold, 2005: 155.

who persisted in what he regarded as the Protestant exaltation of reason (deists, pantheists, atheists), those, like Jacobi, who favoured tradition and faith (Catholics, supernaturalists, mystics), and the apathetic bystanders who had given up all hope of resolution.

Reinhold found a solution to this stand-off in Kant's philosophy. In his *Letters*, he presented Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781, revised 1787) as the ultimate cure for the problem of reason's authority and the "shaking" that accompanied it; by glossing over the vast technical apparatus and focusing instead on what he took to be the primary religious and moral upshot of the work, he reconstrued Kant's philosophy in a manner far more accessible and more obviously relevant to the most important issue of the day. Reinhold's immense success in promulgating Kant's philosophy lies in the fact that he presented it in this way as a solution to the pantheism controversy.³⁴ Kant's rise to fame was thereby given a major boost.³⁵ As the young Fichte wrote of Kant's philosophy in a private letter: "What a blessing for an age in which morality has been destroyed from its very foundations and from whose dictionaries the word *duty* has been erased!"³⁶

Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, as presented by Reinhold, was supposed to solve the problem of nihilism through establishing once and for all the proper domain of reason and thereby "making room for faith," as Kant himself later put it.³⁷ Most importantly, reason itself was to establish the bounds of its own operations; where Jacobi denied rationalism simply because it threatened faith, thereby offending reason itself, Kant argued that reason should rein in its own ambitions without recourse to a non-

³⁴ Beiser, 1987: 45.

³⁵ "Overnight, his teaching turned the small university town [Jena] into the center of the next generation of German thought and the first professional home of the German Idealists: Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel. It also helped to attract to Jena an extraordinary constellation of writers, including Schiller, Hölderlin, Novalis, and Friedrich Schlegel, who all began to focus on Kant and to react to him in terms of the way that the Critical system was initially presented by Reinhold" (Reinhold, 2005: ix).

³⁶ Fichte, 1988: 357.

³⁷ Kant, 1996: Bxxx.

rational source of authority such as tradition, church or state. In other words, he argued that nihilistic rationalism was in fact *irrational*, and that a more consistently rational philosophy—a *critical philosophy*—would naturally turn back of its own accord before encroaching on the territory of faith, and thus not threaten the validity of humanity's spiritual needs.

Kant's principles were to be universally recognized and thus put an end to the internal conflicts of theoretical philosophy—mediating between empiricists and rationalists, realists and idealists—that had hitherto spilled over into dangerous moral and religious disputes like the pantheism controversy. With the rampaging theoretical philosophy of the Enlightenment brought to heel, morality and religion could flourish (without, that is, encroaching on the domains *proper* to theoretical reason, so as to preserve science and politics from the interference of religious authorities with vested interests). This was indeed the order of the day. As we have seen, all but the most radical parties wanted to retain the traditional moral and religious convictions they had grown up with, but reason seemed to demand that these convictions be rooted in *universally acknowledged* grounds; after all, reason does not deal in matters of opinion, but ineluctable truths. According to Kant, no such universal agreement was forthcoming only because it was being sought in domains that theoretical philosophy could not reasonably hope to encompass. Needless to say, however, Kant did not ultimately succeed in garnering the universal agreement he required; he generated as much controversy as he resolved, and he came under attack from all quarters. As Fichte would later put it, although Kant had entirely succeeded in the “practical goal” of assuaging the Humean scepticism of his generation, “it is not our vocation to be satisfied with this. We are destined for complete and systematic cognizance. It is not enough that our doubts be resolved and we be consigned to tranquillity; we also want science.”³⁸ The theoretical foundations of the Kantian philosophy were assailed and,

³⁸ Fichte, 1992: 81.

at the time, the attacks on Kant seemed to show that the prospects of philosophy were “bleak, very bleak indeed.”³⁹

The task of reconciling reason and faith, science and philosophy, was especially vulnerable. Kant had persuasively undermined all hope of providing a theoretical justification of faith through his critique of reason, but his ploy of “making room for faith” was widely regarded as inadequate. The old guard of the Enlightenment “insisted on a theoretical defense of faith, because only such a defense could satisfy the belief in the existence of God, immortality, and providence.” They were convinced that Kant’s “all-crushing” philosophy would lead to nihilism, and “[i]n their eyes Kant’s practical faith was only a ploy to conceal these skeptical consequences.”⁴⁰ It seemed Jacobi was right that reason could not, even by such sophisticated means as the *Critique*, be brought into harmony with faith.

Reinhold himself went on to find inadequacies in the Kantian project, and attempted to provide a “meta-critical foundation” that would protect it from accusations of scepticism.⁴¹ Thus the downfall of Reinhold’s philosophy “had very serious repercussions for the authority of reason”⁴²—through establishing the need for a “first principle” on which to ground the critical philosophy, and then failing catastrophically to provide such a principle, Reinhold succeeded only in undermining his master’s authority. Nevertheless, according to Beiser, Kant’s attempt fixed the general direction of German philosophy for decades to come, during which time his successors devised increasingly elaborate means of shoring up and enlarging the gains he had made against the “specter of nihilism.”⁴³ Thus, although the authority of reason was now “at its shakiest point since its assertion by Descartes nearly two centuries before,” it would not be long before it made a complete recovery and philosophers like Schelling

³⁹ Beiser, 1987: 126.

⁴⁰ Beiser, 1987: 167.

⁴¹ Beiser, 1987: 227.

⁴² Beiser, 1987: 324f.

⁴³ Beiser, 2002: 359-361.

and Hegel were again constructing elaborate metaphysical systems.⁴⁴ By the end of the century, indeed, there was a renewal of self-confidence in philosophy and a sense that nihilism had actually been defeated.

4. From Herder to Hegel

As we have seen, the pantheism controversy was a problem for the Enlightenment because it suggested that the basic assumption of reason's compatibility with faith, and therefore with human dignity, was mistaken. The founding thinkers of the Enlightenment, such as Bacon and Descartes, did not doubt that to deny its divine origin was to rob humanity of its dignity; that considered merely as physical bodies, human beings were worthy of nothing but contempt—"if he be not of kin to God by his spirit, he is a base and ignoble creature."⁴⁵ In Germany, however, some philosophers were becoming increasingly convinced that the natural aspect of human beings need not be cause for such alarm; unlike *philosophes* such as La Mettrie and d'Holbach, moreover, they argued that the recognition of human materiality need not lead to nihilism or to the revaluation of human dignity. Although Lessing's alleged Spinozism was the origin of the controversy that destroyed the German Enlightenment, pantheism was seen as an attractive alternative for philosophers and other intellectuals who sought an escape from the beleaguered fortress of Kantianism, whose imposing walls were now thought to rest on shaky foundations. The leader of this escape was Johann Gottfried Herder, who exercised an enormous influence on the shape of German philosophy at the end of the eighteenth century.⁴⁶

For Herder, pantheism provides a way out of nihilism precisely because it does not elevate the divinity above the natural world: its *divinity* is not transcendent, so its

⁴⁴ Beiser, 1987: 325.

⁴⁵ Bacon, 1902: 45.

⁴⁶ Taylor, 1991.

nature is therefore divine. Of course, nature did not have an especially divine appearance at the turn of the nineteenth century, when the Enlightenment's materialism was still prevalent. Herder's task was thus to interpret nature in such a way as to accommodate his vision of an immanent divinity: if the physical universe was nothing but an elaborate machine, as Spinoza himself was thought to profess, then pantheism does indeed seem equivalent to nihilism; but if, on the contrary, nature is not mere mechanism, but hides within its workings the same higher powers that animate our noblest aspirations, then it need not be thought of as a prison but as a haven for the human spirit. Herder therefore proposed a modified Spinozism, which replaced mechanism with a kind of *vitalism*.⁴⁷

Herder's revival of pantheism, understood in the broadest sense as a theory of the identity of the divinity with the universe, had a powerful effect on the German Idealists who succeeded Kant—to some extent Fichte, and especially Schelling and Hegel. Despite being called "idealists," these philosophers did not think along with Berkeley that the physical world was nothing but a projection of the mind. In Schelling's *Bruno* (1802), a dialogical exposition of his philosophy at the time of his divergence from Fichte, the characters representing Fichte and Schelling agree on a system they both call "idealism" "not because it determines the real by the ideal, but because it refuses to grant more than an ideal status to the opposition of the real and the ideal."⁴⁸ That is, it is an idealism insofar as it denies the reality of the distinction between real and ideal, or between matter and spirit.

The German Idealists developed different ways of proving that matter and spirit were fundamentally identical, but the general form of their approach remained the same: it involved showing that the way in which philosophers had hitherto viewed the world and the place of humanity in it was somehow radically defective, that the opposition between matter and spirit giving rise to nihilism belonged only to this defective view, and that to correct it was therefore to resolve the opposition and eliminate

⁴⁷ Beiser, 2002: 367.

⁴⁸ Schelling, 1984: 58.

nihilism. As Hegel put it in his 1802 *Faith and Knowledge* (an early work written before he had cast off the tutelage of Schelling):

In [true] philosophy, however, the actual and the temporal as such disappear. This is called [by its opponents] cruel dissection destructive of the wholeness of man, or violent abstraction that has no truth, and particularly no practical truth. This abstraction is conceived of as the painful cutting off of an essential part from the completeness of the whole. But the temporal and empirical, and privation, are thus recognized as an essential part and an absolute In-itself. It is as if someone who sees only the feet of a work of art were to complain, when the whole work is revealed to his sight, that he was being deprived of his deprivation and that the incomplete had been in-completed. Finite cognition is this sort of cognition of a part and a singular. If the absolute were put together out of the finite and the infinite, abstracting from the finite would indeed be a loss. In the Idea, however, finite and infinite are one, and hence finitude as such, i.e., as something that was supposed to have truth and reality in and for itself, has vanished. Yet what was negated was only the negative in finitude; and thus the true affirmation was posited.⁴⁹

This passage also serves as an example of the various esoteric languages that prevailed in German philosophy after Kant, and may require some exegesis. Hegel here calls for the elimination of “the actual and the temporal as such” or “finitude as such” from philosophy, not because he denies the existence of the real material world, but because he regards the traditional philosophical conception of the real world as fundamentally impoverished. What philosophers have taken to be real—namely, the spatiotemporal and the mechanical *defined in opposition* to the free creative spirit—is in fact a distorted vision, merely part of a larger and much richer picture. Hegel’s denial of “the actual and the temporal as such” is a call for the correction of this distorted vision. “Finitude as such” does not exist because finitude is at bottom identical to infinity. When Enlightenment philosophers claimed that the physical world was a dead, mindless and meaningless mechanism; when they thought of the physical

⁴⁹ Hegel, 1977: 66.

world as an environment hostile to their higher moral and intellectual vocations; when they lamented that the spiritual dimension of human striving could never be fulfilled; when they therefore despaired, finally, and gave into nihilism, they were simply deluding themselves about the world in which they lived.

When it came to actually demonstrating the underlying spirituality of the physical world—and not merely asserting it in arcane language—Schelling and Hegel diverged. Schelling attempted to prove quasi-scientifically that the natural universe was everywhere imbued with life, consciousness, intelligence, spirit or reason at various levels of sophistication. This was the beginning of *Naturphilosophie*, the philosophy of nature which took its cue from Herder's vitalism,⁵⁰ and which became extremely popular among romantics eager to uncover traces of divinity in the myriad forms of Nature and to overcome the "unbridgeable alienation from nature that we, as moderns, have come to feel."⁵¹ In his *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800), an early but highly influential work, Schelling summarizes the task and result of *Naturphilosophie* as follows:

The necessary tendency of all natural science is thus to move from nature to intelligence. [...] —The highest consummation of natural science would be the complete spiritualizing of all natural laws into laws of intuition and thought. The phenomena (the matter) must wholly disappear, and only the laws (the form) remain. Hence it is, that the more lawfulness emerges in nature itself, the more the husk disappears, the phenomena themselves become more mental, and at length vanish entirely. [...] The completed theory of nature would be that whereby the whole of nature was resolved into an intelligence.—The dead and unconscious products of nature are merely abortive attempts that she makes to reflect herself; inanimate nature so-called is actually as such an immature intelligence, so that in her phenomena the still unwitting character of intelligence is already peeping through.—Nature's highest goal, to become wholly an object to herself, is achieved only through

⁵⁰ Beiser, 1987: 163. For a general overview of *Naturphilosophie*, see Beiser, 2002: 506-529.

⁵¹ Pinkard, 2002: 182.

the last and highest order of reflection, which is none other than man
[...].⁵²

According to Schelling, humanity need not fear its materiality because this is revealed, through the dual lenses of natural and transcendental philosophy, as being identical to its spirituality. Natural science, far from tending towards nihilism, must ultimately show that nature is no less divine than the human spirit; it is thus the task of science to “to render nature intelligent,”⁵³ and so to uncover the stages by which this divinity gradually attempts to manifest itself, first in dead matter, then plants and animals, and finally human beings. Although Schelling’s philosophy underwent significant revisions throughout his career—not least as a means of keeping pace with the rise of his erstwhile disciple Hegel—the reconciliation of the spiritual and material aspects of human existence was his constant preoccupation. As he would later put it in his unfinished *Ages of the World* (1811-1815), it had been the great triumph of his philosophy that “the most supersensible thoughts now receive physical power and life, and, conversely, nature becomes more and more the visible impress of the highest concepts.”⁵⁴

Hegel attempted to reconcile matter and spirit in a somewhat different way: he focused on human rather than natural history, and constructed an elaborate system according to which the ideal is progressively realized in the development of civilization, and the notion that the ideal and real are fundamentally incompatible is a mistake arising out of ignorance of this historical process. Where Schelling’s esoteric *Naturphilosophie* appealed to an introspective generation of romantics, lovers of nature and dreamy idealists, Hegel’s alternative method of “reconciliation with reality” would appeal both to those satisfied with his claim that the world was as it should be (the “Right Hegelians”), and, more importantly, to a more politically-oriented younger generation (the “Left” or “Young Hegelians”), including radicals like Feuerbach,

⁵² Schelling, 1978: 6.

⁵³ Schelling, 1978: 6.

⁵⁴ Saltzer, 1991: 80.

Marx and Engels, eager for the world-historical progress of reason his system also promised.⁵⁵

In general, although the solution to nihilism proposed by philosophers like Schelling and Hegel was extremely simple in its most basic outlines, its actual elaboration gave rise to some of the most difficult and obscure philosophy ever produced—as the samples above suggest—inviting controversy and multiple conflicting interpretations. This well and truly ended the Kantian-Reinholdian dream of a universally accepted solution that would pacify the philosophical arena and clear a space in which humanity could get on with the business of living well. The project of Enlightenment thereby came to an end, and was replaced first and foremost by romanticism, of which Schelling was the philosophical “prince.”⁵⁶ During the ensuing decades, the stance of this prevailing philosophy, following Schelling and Hegel, was that nihilism had been defeated, and human dignity vindicated.⁵⁷ In his 1827 lectures on the “Philosophy of Life,” Friedrich Schlegel could thus state that he had “no hesitation in saying that a living faith and a living science will never be at issue together, at least on essential points.”⁵⁸ These developments—beginning with Kant and Reinhold—thus put an end to the *Sturm und Drang* movement: Schiller, as we saw above, ceased to regard nihilism as a serious threat to civilized human beings, and in his later essays the caprice he had formerly embodied in the heroes of his plays was conceived instead as a relic of the “savage” past.

5. The Aftermath of Idealism in Russia

In Russia, therefore, the dominant intellectual trend of the 1830s—Dostoevsky’s teenage years—was the fruit of these philosophical developments: an idealistic

⁵⁵ We shall encounter this school of thought again below.

⁵⁶ Pinkard, 2002: 172.

⁵⁷ For an introduction to this phase of German philosophy, see Beiser, 2002: 349-593.

⁵⁸ Schlegel, 1847: 196.

romanticism characterised by “unappeasable desires which could not be satisfied within the bounds of earthly life” and by “tempestuous passions.”⁵⁹ This romanticism privileged the extraordinary over the mundane, and gave full reign to the imagination in the assurance that in elevating themselves as far as possible above the normal and the everyday, romantic idealists were nevertheless secure in their flights of fancy. Schelling had granted artists and poets a unique status as purveyors of esoteric truths otherwise known only to philosophers: “Each splendid painting owes, as it were, its genesis to a removal of the invisible barrier dividing the real from the ideal world,” and is quite literally a portal into the divinity of which the material world is merely the “imperfect reflection.”⁶⁰ Those who devoted themselves to the “ideal world” did not see that they were courting disappointment; philosophy had assured them that the sublime dignity of their vision was under no threat from the real world, that the real world was itself sublime, and could be revealed as such by the activity of inspired poets. “The world must be made Romantic,” Novalis had written; “By endowing the commonplace with a higher meaning, the ordinary with mysterious respect, the known with the dignity of the unknown, the finite with the appearance of the infinite, I am making it Romantic.”⁶¹ As Herzen joked in his memoirs, the teachings of German Idealism were not only studied and debated, but taken to heart and practiced: “Everything that in reality was direct, every simple feeling, was exalted into abstract categories and came back from them without a drop of living blood, a pale, algebraic shadow. In all this there was a *naïveté* of a sort, because it was all perfectly sincere.”⁶²

⁵⁹ Frank, 1977: 95.

⁶⁰ Schelling, 1978: 232.

⁶¹ Novalis, 1997: 60.

⁶² Herzen, 1968: 400. He continues with an example: “The man who went for a walk in Sokolniky went in order to give himself up to the pantheistic feeling of his unity with the cosmos; and if on the way he happened upon a drunken soldier, or a peasant woman who got into conversation with him, the philosopher did not simply talk to them, but defined the essential substance of the people in its immediate and fortuitous manifestation. The very tear that started to the eye was strictly referred to its proper classification, to *Gemüth* or ‘the tragic in the heart.’”

Taken as an attitude towards day to day existence in human society, this romanticism was unsustainable—not least in Russia, where the glaring contrast between the flights of the romantic imagination and the terrible condition of the indentured bulk of the population was impossible to ignore. Dostoevsky himself received a rude awakening at the age of fifteen, when his father was taking him and his brother to Saint Petersburg to enrol in the engineering school.⁶³ As he later recalled in his *Writer's Diary*, “My brother and I were eager to enter a new life and were terribly prone to dreaming of the ‘beautiful and the sublime’ (this phrase was still fresh then and was spoken without irony). [...] we dreamed only of poetry and poets. My brother wrote verses—three a day—and even on the road I was continually composing in my mind a novel from Venetian life.”⁶⁴ It was on this journey that he observed a government courier systematically beating his driver, spurring him on to whip the horses into a frenzy, just as if this were the only way in which the man and the horses could be expected to function.⁶⁵ This “disgusting scene,” apparently nothing out of the ordinary in the world of government couriers and coachmen, became lodged far more strongly in Dostoevsky’s memory than the “novel from Venetian life” he was mentally composing, and served him as a kind of “emblem” when he later dedicated himself to the improvement of society.⁶⁶

⁶³ Frank, 1977: 70.

⁶⁴ Dostoevsky, 1994: 327.

⁶⁵ “Before the coachman could even start the horses, the courier stood up and, silently, without any word whatsoever, raised his huge right fist and dealt a painful blow straight down on the back of the coachman’s neck. The coachman jolted forward, raised his whip, and lashed the shaft horse with all his might. The horses started off with a rush, but this did nothing to appease the courier. He was not angry; he was acting according to his own plan, from something preconceived and tested through many years of experience; and the terrible fist was raised again, and again it struck the coachman’s neck, and then again and again; and so it continued until the troika disappeared from sight. Naturally the coachman, who could barely hold on because of the blows, kept lashing the horses every second like one gone mad; and at last his blows made the horses fly off as if possessed. Our coachman explained to me that all government couriers travel in almost the same fashion and that this particular one was universally known for it” (Dostoevsky, 1994: 328).

⁶⁶ Dostoevsky, 1994: 328.

Experiences of this kind cannot have been uncommon at a time when elevated romantic sensibilities coexisted so closely with undisguised brutality, not to mention the general coarseness of everyday life. As Gogol observed in *Dead Souls*: although “some dreamy twenty-year-old youth” might find ample nourishment for his imagination in the enjoyment of a play by Schiller, he could not possibly fail to realize, as if doused by a bucket of cold water, that on leaving the theatre “he is back on earth, and even in the haymarket and near a pub,” surrounded by lecherous drunkards and prostitutes.⁶⁷ Thus by the 1840s, which was also a period of general instability in European politics, the detachment of romanticism could no longer be sustained. The radicals of this decade—led by such figures as Belinsky and Herzen—were breaking with their youthful romantic ideals, and adopting a more “realistic” and overtly political orientation.⁶⁸ For “leftist Hegelian writers and Russian radicals at the middle of the century,” Neuhauser writes,

the approximately forty to fifty years from the 1780’s to the 1840’s in Russia were now conceived as one integral whole, a period of high hopes and dreams, of romantic and idealistic concepts which had led to an excessive development of man’s sensibilities and reflective capabilities to the detriment of his emotional balance, and eventually to a loss of the sense of the proper relationship between the subjective world of thought and emotions, and the objective world of concrete sociopolitical existence.⁶⁹

In moving away from idealistic romanticism towards a greater emphasis on politics and science, the Russian intelligentsia was merely keeping in step with developments in Western Europe.⁷⁰ This change was reflected in the literature of the day, which moved towards greater realism and social criticism in works like Turgenev’s *Sketches from a Hunter’s Album*, some of which I shall return to consider in due course. Even straightforwardly romantic writers took a more cautious approach, lacking in self-

⁶⁷ Gogol, 1961: 140.

⁶⁸ Paperno, 1988: 63; Terras, 1974: 69-76.

⁶⁹ Neuhauser, 1974: 336.

⁷⁰ Frank, 1977: 101ff.

assurance. We may take for example Vladimir Odoevsky's *Russian Nights*, published whole in 1844 but compiled from previously published stories and ruminations deriving from the '20s and '30s, and one of the most important prose works of Russian romanticism.⁷¹

The work has no plot but follows a group of friends who meet to discuss diverse philosophical issues and read essays or short stories. The leader of the group and Odoevsky's primary mouthpiece is, significantly, nick-named Faust—he is a romantic idealist in the mystical-scientific tradition of Schelling.⁷² Odoevsky's romanticism is by no means naive, however, and is aware of its own limitations. At one point, for example, the cast of characters is discussing why people tend to congregate at night. The romantic Faust posits what he calls a "mystical" explanation: the night is hostile; people need the sun, and so gather for protection in its absence. He is rebuffed by the rationalist Victor: "Oh, you dreamer! Facts are nothing to you. Doesn't man suffer from the sun's heat, like all plants?" Faust replies that the sun only hurts us because we feel it through the atmosphere: aeronauts don't feel its heat when they ascend. His implication is that the "sun," by which he also signifies *the ideal*, is good in itself, but can cause pain to humans because we are, like plants, shackled to the earth by our material bodies.⁷³ Faust's companions are not convinced:

Victor: "That's completely true, and here is another proof: beyond a certain limit of the atmosphere, blood came out of the aeronauts' ears; it became difficult for them to breathe; and they shivered from cold."

Rostislav: "This fact, it seems to me, expresses the real and difficult problem of man: to rise from the earth, without leaving it."

Vyacheslav: "That is, in other words, one must seek for the possible—and not chase in vain after the impossible."

⁷¹ Odoevsky, 1965: 14.

⁷² Odoevsky himself became known as "the Russian Faust" (Odoevsky, 1965: 7).

⁷³ In Plato's analogy of the cave, the sun also symbolizes "the absolute" or the source of all ideal forms (*Republic*, 514a–520a (Plato, 1997: 1132–1137)).

Faust answered nothing but changed the subject.⁷⁴

Faust's unwillingness to continue this conversation suggests an unwillingness to tackle to the problem of nihilism head-on. Odoevsky thus registers the problem of harmonizing nature and spirit as well as, perhaps, the inability of traditional romanticism to provide a convincing solution. The reluctance of the romantic to compromise his spiritual aspirations in pursuit of this harmony is also cast in a less than favourable light: Faust would apparently prefer to rise from the earth *and* leave it behind in neo-Platonic fashion, but, unable to refute Victor, is shown up by the more moderate Rostislav and Vyacheslav.

In general, however, despite the shift away from what came to be regarded as the naive, otherworldly dreaming of romanticism proper, German Idealist philosophy remained popular and a general tendency towards excessively abstract theorizing still prevailed.⁷⁵ As Milton Ehre observes: "The mood was anti-romantic, though romanticism proved more resilient than many supposed."⁷⁶ Hegel in particular continued through the 1840s to influence the Russian intelligentsia, who afterwards regarded his influence as highly dubious—no better than mystical aberrations of Schelling and his followers—and blamed him for continuing to distract them from real social and political issues even after they had decided to refocus their efforts in that direction.⁷⁷ Bakunin's much later recollections serve to illustrate the recalcitrance of these attitudes among the intelligentsia:

Unless you lived in those times, you will never understand how powerful the fascination of [Hegel's] philosophical system was in the 1830s and 1840s. [...] This movement created a world that was infinitely

⁷⁴ Odoevsky, 1965: 122.

⁷⁵ Herzen provides an overview of the intellectual culture of the period in *My Past and Thoughts* (Herzen, 1968: 389-425).

⁷⁶ Goncharov, 2005: ix.

⁷⁷ As usual, these concerns had their precedent in Germany itself. As Heine wrote in his 1834 history of German religion and philosophy, for example: "when it was observed especially that German young people, absorbed in metaphysical abstractions, were oblivious to the most urgent questions of the time and became unfit for practical life, then indeed patriots and friends of liberty naturally felt a righteous indignation at philosophy" (Heine, 2002: 241).

broad, rich, lofty, and ostensibly perfectly rational, but that remained as alien to earthly life and reality as it was to the heaven of Christian theology. As a result, this world, like Fata Morgana neither reaching heaven nor touching the earth but suspended between them, turned the life of its adherents, its introspective and poetizing inhabitants, into an uninterrupted series of somnambulistic ideas and experiences. It rendered them totally unfit for life, or, even worse, condemned them to do in the real world exactly the opposite of what they worshipped in their poetic or metaphysical ideal.⁷⁸

This kind of criticism was entirely commonplace.⁷⁹ In fact, however, Russian romanticism almost always contained the seeds of its own critique, and was never as uniformly dreamy and complacent as later accounts would seem to suggest. Donald Fanger has shown that, in general, realism as a literary movement grew out of romanticism as a kind of deflation and disillusionment of its own attitudes—as indicated by such titles as Dickens' *Great Expectations* and Balzac's *Lost Illusions*.⁸⁰ We shall have recourse to consider this trend further in due course: as we shall see in Chapter 9, the self-critical dimension of romanticism emerged especially in Byronism.

6. The Resurgence of Nihilism

Despite the hopes of some Enlightenment philosophers, for a long time it seemed impossible to account for human existence in purely natural terms. It seemed that human beings, unique in their possession of spirit or soul, did not belong within nature and were thus foreign to their own bodies and bodily inclinations, by which they were imprisoned and prevented from fulfilling their spiritual vocation. Within this paradigm, the only way of reconciling humanity with nature—and thus refuting

⁷⁸ Bakunin, 1990: 130f. Bakunin's description is clearly of a piece with Dostoevsky's characterization of the Underground Man, a member of the generation described.

⁷⁹ See, e.g., Paperno, 1988: 60-68.

⁸⁰ Fanger, 1965: 8.

nihilism and solving the problem of human dignity—was to show that the natural world was actually, contrary to initial appearances, at bottom no less spiritual than humanity. This was in fact the approach taken by Herder and his followers, as we saw above. It was argued that the contradiction between the bodily and the spiritual needs of humanity would ultimately be resolved when we had properly understood and oriented ourselves within a grand scheme in which nature and spirit are one.

For such an approach to be viable, it was necessary to interpret natural phenomena in such a way as to reveal their underlying harmony with the spiritual aspirations of humanity. As we have seen, the spiritual interpretation of nature found its apotheosis in the *Naturphilosophie* of Schelling. But, unfortunately for Schelling, his theories could not retain scientific credibility for long. *Naturphilosophie* was esoteric, mystical and, even if it was not entirely divorced from empirical investigation, misjudged the direction in which natural science would develop in the nineteenth century.⁸¹ As the century progressed, chemistry and biology in particular promised to deliver at last a completely mechanical explanation of life⁸²—hopes that were seemingly justified by the success of Darwin’s theory of evolution by natural selection.⁸³ The nihilistic implications of this revolution were immediately identified. When Herzen, for example, came to realize that Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie* could no longer be regarded as scientifically viable he recognized clearly that it would therefore be incapable of reconciling nature with human sublimity.⁸⁴

Hegel’s solution to nihilism was not as susceptible to scientific obsolescence, since it relied less on the interpretation of natural phenomena and more on the interpretation of human history (which is far more malleable), but it too succumbed as the changing tastes rendered its high-flown metaphysical speculations unpalatable. The waning of

⁸¹ Beiser, 2002: 507f.

⁸² “The naturalist, equipped with the microscope, investigates life to the last detail and observes its inner workings. The physiologist has met the chemist on this threshold of life” (Herzen, 1956: 100).

⁸³ Beiser, 2014: 55.

⁸⁴ Kelly, 2016: 214.

Hegel's popularity was precipitated by his own disciples. The radical "Young Hegelians" dispensed with the main apparatus of his system, which they regarded as intellectual self-indulgence. As Feuerbach wrote in 1843: "The *Philosophy of the Future* addresses itself to the task of leading philosophy from the realm of 'detached souls' back into the realm of embodied, living souls; of compelling philosophy to come down from its divine and self-sufficient blissfulness in thought and open its eyes to human misery."⁸⁵ The Young Hegelians did, however, salvage Hegel's idea of rational historical progress.⁸⁶ With the furtherance of this progress in mind, they worked with a view to generating real cultural and political change by means of rational criticism of all established principles that they took to conceal falsity and injustice. This critique was not cautious self-examination in a Cartesian or Kantian spirit, however; there was no sense in which the Young Hegelians were "making room for faith," or attempting to forge a truce between reason and religion, progress and tradition. Here "critique" amounted to nothing more than demanding rational justification for everything, salvaging what was considered reasonable and useful and discarding the rest. Religion was the primary target. As the first of Feuerbach's *Principles* states: "The task of the modern era was the realization and humanization of God — the transformation and dissolution of theology into anthropology."⁸⁷ All the attributes traditionally predicated of God are actually attributes of nature or humanity or both; the idea that God is a separate personal entity is merely a fictional addendum and should be discarded.⁸⁸ This approach was not entirely original. "Since the early eighteenth century," as we know, "criticism had been vital to philosophy, indeed the hallmark of the Enlightenment itself. In advocating critique, then, the young Hegelians were waving the banner of Enlightenment and following a hallowed tradition of their own."⁸⁹ Thus it was a revival of the Enlightenment's rather *uncritical* faith in the power of rational criticism, the attitude that had given rise to the problem of nihilism

⁸⁵ Feuerbach, 2012: 175.

⁸⁶ Beiser, 2014: 27.

⁸⁷ Feuerbach, 2012: 177.

⁸⁸ Feuerbach, 2012: 192.

⁸⁹ Beiser, 2014: 23.

in the first place; for less radical thinkers, this could only mean a return to the generalized cultural “shaking” that had troubled German philosophy from Kant to the Young Hegelians’ own master: “Though it began in theology, neo-Hegelian criticism soon extended to other spheres. It was the task of critique to expose alienation in all its lairs, whether in society, economy, state, or church.”⁹⁰ In exposing the irrational foundations of existing institutions, and demanding progressive elimination or transformation of these institutions in accordance with reason, these thinkers were at the most general level simply carrying on the work of the *philosophes*.

In the meantime, radical thought was developing in increasingly rationalistic directions in France as well. Utopian socialist thinkers like Charles Fourier, Victor Considerant and Henri de Saint-Simon had argued, in the wake of the French Revolution, for radically different approaches to social organization based on (what they argued was) a more scientific attitude towards human society, in contrast to the wild speculations of the *philosophes*.⁹¹ These writers were hugely influential throughout Europe, with “Saint-Simonism” in particular becoming almost a religion in its own right.⁹² They agreed that the root cause of the Terror was, as we saw Condorcet suggest above, a lack of scientific rigour—insofar as the philosophy of the Enlightenment had failed to reform society in a wholly positive way, this was *not* because the search for a perfectly rigorous and useful science of politics was misguided, but rather because the *philosophes* had failed to apply sufficient rigor to their investigations; they paid lip service to reason, but did not attempt to furnish humanity with an exact science of human society. Politics demanded more science, not less. As Fourier wrote in his *Theory of the Four Movements* (1808):

In communal interaction the passions are like an orchestra composed of 1620 instruments; and the philosophers who seek to guide them may be compared to a group of intruding children who only succeed in making a terrible racket when they try to play the instruments. Should one

⁹⁰ Beiser, 2014: 24.

⁹¹ Beecher, 2001.

⁹² Saint-Simon, 1975: 49ff.

conclude that music is harmful to man and that the violins must be restrained, the basses stopped, and the flutes silenced? No, instead the little brats must be dismissed and the instruments given to expert musicians. [...] Man's only enemies are the philosophers who wish to guide the passions without having the least idea of the mechanism assigned to them by nature.⁹³

Though highly critical of the meddling "philosophers," Fourier's supposedly more "scientific" approach was laden with bizarre empirical hypotheses. The number 1,620 is an example of the absurd degree of quantitative precision with which Fourier presented his theories. In general, Fourier's political view was that human nature, properly understood, would lend itself to the development of a perfectly harmonious society if only it was allowed to flourish and exert itself in the right directions. Previous approaches to political organization had failed because the passions had been inadequately understood and been forced to channel their energies down unnatural and destructive pathways. There are no bad passions, only passions that have been poorly matched with activities; thus it is only necessary to catalogue all 1,620 of the passions and their various combinations, and match them with suitable occupations calculated to harmonize in society as a whole. In practice this theory amounts to such naive proclamations as that Nero's bloodthirstiness would have been a virtue rather than a vice if only he had been a butcher instead of an emperor.⁹⁴

In spite of the extravagance of his own theories, Fourier's passionate call for a hard science of human organization resonated with a generation impressed by the progress of science and filled with the hope that a natural science of human life would soon replace the unscientific speculations of the *philosophes*—speculations which led, in popular opinion, to the Revolution and the Terror—and, crucially, replace or meld with Christianity to become the guiding beacon of civilization.⁹⁵ This trend was

⁹³ Fourier, 1971: 223.

⁹⁴ Fourier, 1971: 303.

⁹⁵ Despite accepting their rationalism and scientism, the utopian socialists typically distanced themselves from what they regarded as the atheism and materialism of the *philosophes*

intensified in the hugely influential work of Auguste Comte, disciple of Saint-Simon and founder of “positivism.” According to Comte, “the people are today spiritually trusting and subordinate towards their scientific leaders,”⁹⁶ and science had already superseded religion as moral and political lodestar. He claims that spiritual subordination to scientists is not, unlike religious subordination, humiliating for the people because, while the latter is founded on an arbitrary authority, the authority of science—and, he therefore assumes, of scientists—is founded on principles that anyone can recognize and understand.⁹⁷ And yet Comte is also clear that the people should delegate responsibility for their own political, and indeed moral, situation; he rejects democracy completely, along with unfettered freedom of conscience.⁹⁸ Anticipating Dostoevsky’s *Grand Inquisitor*, he does not mince words: “The people have been eliminated from the question. It is for the people that the question will be resolved, but they will remain external and passive.”⁹⁹ He flatly denies that this could have negative consequences for society: “The fear of one day seeing the establishment of a despotism founded on the sciences is a chimera as ridiculous as it is absurd: it could only arise in minds that are absolutely alien to all positive ideas.”¹⁰⁰ Comte’s refusal to acknowledge that his philosophy might at least lend itself to abuse by unscrupulous authoritarians is hardly reassuring. In any case, it is clear that in displacing freedom of conscience with the absolute authority of scientists, and in placing morality and politics into their hands, Comte’s “positivist” philosophy is deeply nihilistic. “Social reorganization has been viewed as a purely practical operation,” he proclaims, “whereas it is essentially theoretical.”¹⁰¹ The idea that theory should always precede practice, where “theory” is taken in a very narrow sense to designate the ruminations of one or another nineteenth-century intellectual, was not questioned by any radical

(Beecher, 2001: 3), adopting a more romantic and conciliatory attitude towards human religiosity (if not towards orthodox forms of Christianity).

⁹⁶ Comte, 1998: 41.

⁹⁷ Comte, 1998: 42.

⁹⁸ Comte, 1998: 55.

⁹⁹ Comte, 1998: 42.

¹⁰⁰ Comte, 1998: 42.

¹⁰¹ Comte, 1998: 80.

political thinkers at that time (with the exception, as we saw in Chapter 2, of Max Stirner); it is one of the hallmarks of nihilism.¹⁰²

* * *

As schools of thought or discrete philosophical movements, Young Hegelian criticism and French utopian socialism faltered along with the failed revolutions of 1848.¹⁰³ Radicals like Marx and Engels continued to argue for scientifically informed social, cultural and political progress; but they attempted to distance themselves from their more “utopian” forebears by the now familiar means of advocating a *more* rational, *more* scientific approach.¹⁰⁴ It was around this time that, predictably, the problem of nihilism returned in full force to the public consciousness. As Frederick Beiser has it, the “chief aim” of Hegel’s philosophy was to solve the problem posed by the pantheism controversy; insofar as this was the case, and insofar as he had convinced his audience that he had succeeded in this aim, the problem naturally returned with the waning of his influence.¹⁰⁵ The dualism of nature and spirit that he had attempted to resolve again became an urgent problem, and the threat of nihilism along with it. What’s more, it was given new impetus by a fresh generation of radical thinkers ready to *embrace* the nihilistic consequences of rationalism far more readily than their Enlightenment forebears. Thus began the “materialism controversy,” which Beiser calls “one of the most important intellectual disputes of the second half of the nineteenth century” and, in effect, merely “the latest version of the old conflict between reason and faith.”¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² Thus the Underground Man complains of a complete lack of spontaneity and “living life” in nineteenth-century intellectuals (Dostoevsky, 2001: 91). Dostoevsky’s Ridiculous Man would later encapsulate his whole utopian spirituality in the maxim that *life is higher than and must precede thought* (Dostoevsky, 1994: 960).

¹⁰³ Beiser, 2014: 28; Beecher, 2001: 5.

¹⁰⁴ See e.g. Marx and Engels, 1978: 683-717.

¹⁰⁵ Beiser, 2014: 54.

¹⁰⁶ Beiser, 2014: 53.

On the side of reason, materialists like Ludwig Büchner openly professed a nihilism that would have scandalized Jacobi's rationalist opponents. Of the claim that materialism might be a threat to morality, Büchner is entirely dismissive. "To pretend that the materialism of science changes all great and noble ideas into vain dreams," he writes in *Force and Matter* (1855), "that materialism has no future and no morality, is such a gratuitous assertion that it deserves no refutation."¹⁰⁷ He points out that there have always been materialists who were yet "neither fools, robbers, assassins, nor desperadoes." Obviously, however, Büchner does not include the tenets of religion among his "great and noble ideas," since these are not something he expects to survive scientific scrutiny; indeed, it is clear that his uncompromising vision of humanity's place in the universe provides little by way of consolation for anyone who clings to traditional values. He argues that free will is a delusion, and happily draws the radical conclusion that there is no such thing as moral responsibility.¹⁰⁸ Moreover, he does not attempt to put anything in the place of traditional morality; his moral project, insofar as he has one, is entirely negative.¹⁰⁹ Thus, despite his assurance that materialism is benign, Büchner ends his work by divesting himself of all liability for the practical impact of his work, which, as a supposedly disinterested inquiry into the truth, he takes to outrank considerations of merely human interest:

We must finally be permitted to leave all questions about morality and utility out of sight. The chief, and indeed the sole object which concerned us in these researches, is truth. Nature exists neither for religion, for morality, nor for human beings; but it exists for itself. What else can we do but take it as it is? Would it not be ridiculous in us to cry like little children, because our bread is not sufficiently buttered?¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ Büchner, 1864: 256.

¹⁰⁸ Beiser, 2014: 75.

¹⁰⁹ Beiser, 2014: 76.

¹¹⁰ Büchner, 1864: 257.

7. Conclusion

To recapitulate: first, as we saw, the nihilism of the Enlightenment was perceived as a threat to human dignity by philosophers in Germany, who, beginning with pantheism controversy, turned their attention to the “single fundamental problem” of the authority of reason. Following the philosophical revolutions of Kant and Herder, the German Idealists found a solution to this problem in the idea that the contrast between matter and spirit, real and ideal, is not fundamental or is merely an illusion. This assuaged the *Sturm und Drang* movement; the romanticism that followed was, in the main, self-assured in its lofty idealism, indulging in what would later be thought of as “unappeasable desires which could not be satisfied within the bounds of earthly life.”¹¹¹ Spurred by the need for political and economic reform, however, and buoyed by progress in natural science, the radical thinkers of the nineteenth century argued against this romanticism for what was, in effect, a return to the Enlightenment: sweeping rational criticism and progress in all spheres of human culture. The implications of these developments for the problem of human dignity did not go unnoticed; as during the Enlightenment itself, rationalism was recognized as a threat to traditional notions of human dignity as transcendence over nature, and the “materialism controversy” recapitulated the “pantheism controversy” of the previous century. The way in which educated Russians responded to these philosophical developments is reflected in their literature, to which I shall now turn.

¹¹¹ Frank, 1977: 95.

Chapter 9: Byronic Disillusionment

1. Introduction

Around the same time that Schelling's and Hegel's systems were gaining and losing influence, Lord Byron was having a powerful effect on literature and intellectual culture more generally. The problem of human dignity was an obsession for Byron; he was overawed by the sublime elevation of the human spirit above material nature; and he was no less preoccupied by the constraints imposed on humanity by its physical and mental limitations. Unlike the German Idealists, he did not see any way of reconciling the higher and lower aspects of humanity philosophically. Humans, as he laments in *Manfred*, are "Half dust, half deity, alike unfit / To sink or soar."¹ Byronism combines idealism and disillusionment in a way that is fundamental to the literary tradition leading up to *Notes from Underground*. It was immensely appealing to those romantics who were not convinced by, or, later, had become disillusioned with, the German Idealist solution to the problem of nihilism, and who had thereby come to adopt a more pessimistic view of humanity's place in the material world. Some of the most important and influential works in the Russian canon, such as Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* and Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time*, were direct responses to this pervasive cultural phenomenon which, in its comfortless appraisal of the human condition, anticipated the collapse of idealistic romanticism, the intelligentsia's disavowal of its own "high hopes and dreams," and the resurgence of nihilism in the second half of the century.

In this chapter, I shall outline the theme of disillusionment in the work of Byron and his followers Pushkin and Lermontov, as well as the theme of the "superfluous man" that stemmed from their work and was developed by writers like Herzen, Turgenev

¹ Byron, 2000: 283.

and Goncharov. As stated in the introduction to Chapter 8, this survey will serve to highlight those aspects of Dostoevsky's characterization of disillusionment that do not recall the caprice of the *Sturm und Drang*, but rather belong to this post-Byronic tradition of the "superfluous man." It will thus serve as a foil for the claims made in Chapters 6 and 7, highlighting the kinship between the Underground Man and heroes like Karl Moor and Faust. As in the case of the philosophical developments considered in Chapter 8, it will also serve to illuminate the conceptual background of Dostoevsky's polemic against utopian socialism.

2. Byron

Though not as personally significant for Dostoevsky as German writers like Schiller and Goethe, Byron—if only because of his pervasive influence on letters and culture more generally—nevertheless left an impression on Dostoevsky's work. If the Underground Man's caprice is most closely related to the *Sturm und Drang*, other aspects of his character are recognizably Byronic. The Underground Man himself refers to Byron's *Manfred* in passing, when mocking his former heroic dreams; but the overall influence of Byron on his character is more general. His irony, his deliberate vulgarity, his polemical mode of writing, are all Byronic traits. On the psychological level, the fact that his self-absorption and egotism make direct communication impossible, and impede healthy relations with other people, can also be seen in this light. As William Hazlitt noted of Byron: "He hangs the cloud, the film of his existence over all outward things, sits in the centre of his thoughts," such that when enjoying his poetry "we are still imprisoned in a dungeon; a curtain intercepts our view; we do not breathe freely the air of nature or of our own thoughts."² The Underground Man plainly conforms to this Byronic stereotype. Manfred's egotism stems from an awareness of his superiority over nature—in other words, a keen sense of human dignity—and a proud

² Hazlitt, 1991: 116f.

disdain of people who fail to live up to his expectations. Whenever he crossed paths with another human being, Manfred says, he felt “degraded back to them, / And was all clay again.”³ The Underground Man is also avowedly proud of his own intellectual and cultural superiority, and likewise finds himself utterly deflated whenever he makes contact with other people (such as his only regular acquaintance, office chief Anton Antonym, whose banality acts as a counterweight to the Underground Man’s lofty idealism).⁴ The Underground Man’s masochistic mockery of his own ideals is also Byronic. Hazlitt paid close attention to this aspect of Byron’s work, which he took to be almost unique to “the Noble Lord”:

He hallows in order to desecrate, takes a pleasure in defacing the images of beauty his hands have wrought, and raises our hopes and our belief in goodness to Heaven only to dash them to the earth again, and break them in pieces the more effectively from the very height they have fallen.⁵

The Underground Man can hardly be said, in the *Notes*, to “raise our hopes and our belief in goodness,” but it is clear that he shares with Byron a proclivity for desecrating that which he himself has hallowed, whether by mocking his own hopes and dreams, or mocking what he takes to be the highest consummation of love by engaging in “debauchery.”⁶ And even though—or precisely because—he takes himself to be superior to the majority of people, he takes a kind of masochistic pleasure in degrading himself below the lowest—debauching and courting bar fights—“as if,” as Hazlitt says of Byron, “the eagle were to build its eyry in a common sewer.”⁷

³ Byron, 2000: 291.

⁴ Dostoevsky, 2001: 41f.

⁵ Hazlitt, 1991: 122.

⁶ “I happened to glance into a mirror. My overwrought face appeared extremely repulsive: it was pale, spiteful, and mean; and my hair was dishevelled. ‘It doesn’t matter. I’m glad,’ I thought. ‘In fact, I’m even delighted that I’ll seem so repulsive to her; that pleases me. . . .’” (Dostoevsky, 2001: 60f.). “Now I’d suddenly realized how absurd, how revolting as a spider, was the idea of debauchery, which, without love, crudely and shamelessly begins precisely at the point where genuine love is consummated” (Dostoevsky, 2001: 61).

⁷ Hazlitt, 1991: 122. Dostoevsky, 2001: 6, 34f.

It is not my intention to investigate these similarities any further here, since they do not pertain to the psychology of caprice in which we are primarily interested, but only to indicate the sources of those of the Underground Man's characteristics that set him apart from the *Sturm und Drang* heroes. My immediate purpose is to reveal the extent to which Byron's influence changed the way in which writers before Dostoevsky approached the theme of nihilism and disillusioned idealism, and so to observe the manifestations of this theme in the work of Byron himself and of those he influenced. Byron's most direct engagement with the problem of nihilism is perhaps his play *Cain*, a later work published in 1821, which, according to Thorslev, "show[s] the Byronic Hero in the last stage of its development," free from the Gothic trappings of *Manfred*.⁸ This play is a psychological and philosophical investigation of Cain's murder of Abel. As Byron construes it, the murder is ultimately prompted by Cain's Faustian dissatisfaction with the limits of human knowledge and experience.⁹ Cain is spurred on by Lucifer, who, like Faust's Mephistopheles, teases him with supernatural revelations that ultimately leave him unfulfilled and disillusioned.

Cain aspires to understand the origin of the world, the nature of life and death, and his own place within and outside the natural world; he is proud of his aspirations and the knowledge that they promise, insofar as it will raise him mentally above the rest of creation. But Lucifer points out that Cain's knowledge, his spiritual aspect, the source of his dignity, is necessarily tied to his limited human body — "chain'd down / To the most gross and petty paltry wants, / All foul and fulsome"¹⁰—and thereby prevented from attaining its full potential. Like Faust, Cain is consequently tormented by nihilism and the problem of human dignity: he reasons that he is unable to transcend the limits of his human frame, that within this frame he will not be able to attain the knowledge he aspires to, and that human existence is therefore wretched.

⁸ Thorslev, 1962: 178.

⁹ Byron, 2000: 903f.

¹⁰ Byron, 2000: 902.

Throughout the play we are shown the effects of Cain's aspirations on his interpersonal relations. Lucifer himself cannot love; Cain can, however, and the conflict between his desire for knowledge and his love of his family "gives the drama its tragic conflict," as Thorslev points out.¹¹ He is warned that he must "Choose betwixt love and knowledge,"¹² and, dedicating himself to the latter, is indeed compelled to abandon the former and eventually to murder his own brother in a state of confusion, exasperation, and disillusionment.¹³ Just like Goethe's *Faust*, then, *Cain* thus addresses the human consequences of the "needs of reason," the striving of human beings to understand their supernatural origins and confirm their human dignity—which, in the Biblical setting of *Cain*, is literally the effects of eating the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge.

Apart from his egotism, irony and intellectual masochism, Byron's most important contribution to the tradition under discussion is his extreme development of the idea that despairing idealism is a curse borne by superior individuals, who must consequently—like Cain—become alienated from the rest of humanity, incapable of sharing their emotional burdens, and incapable of doing anything to improve their situations. Where the characteristic heroes of the *Sturm und Drang* react to their disillusionment capriciously, the Byronic hero becomes despondent and gives in to *spleen* in recognition of the intractability of his despair. Like the former, he recognizes the futility of action in a world that is fundamentally hostile to the highest human aspirations, but, unlike them, he does not persist in striving, fuming and fulminating against every constraint, straining to bend the world to his will; his disillusionment has attained a higher degree of self-consciousness, and he retreats into languorous isolation or apathy. In these respects, Byronism influenced the shape of Russian literature markedly. We have already seen that several of the Underground Man's characteristics are straightforwardly Byronic; and in what follows we shall consider the ways in

¹¹ Thorslev, 1962: 180.

¹² Byron, 2000: 897.

¹³ Although conceived in this way the murder of Abel is not, one might think, psychologically well-motivated, its symbolic value is clear—knowledge is incompatible with love.

which Byron influenced Russian portrayals of disillusionment more generally. The distinction between Byronic spleen and *Sturm und Drang* caprice is one that I would like to emphasize and shall return to later, as I believe it is a useful means of distinguishing the Underground Man's mode of disillusionment from that of his various Russian predecessors, and highlighting his kinship with the *Stürmer und Dränger*.

3. Pushkin and Lermontov

Before turning to consider Byron's most important Russian heirs, we may return briefly to Schiller's psychology of idealism, for in *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry* he had already discussed the problem of inertia in a manner that anticipates Byronism and illuminates the way in which Byronic spleen should be understood in relation to the disillusioned idealism discussed in the previous chapter. The problem of inertia arises, according to Schiller, when the idealist is called to *act* in the real world, that is, to act in accordance with the ideal and attempt to realize it:

The contrast between the absolute magnificence that unfailingly is his point of departure and the absolute insignificance of the individual instance to which he has to apply the former is much too powerful. Because his will—in terms of its form—is always directed to the whole, he does not want to direct it—as far as its content is concerned—to fragments and yet it is largely by means of small-scale accomplishments alone that he can prove his moral character. Thus, not infrequently it happens that because of the unlimitedness of the ideal he overlooks the limited instance of its application, and, filled with a sense of the maximum, he neglects the minimum out of which alone everything great in actual life grows.¹⁴

Because the real world is *so* far removed from the ideal, the idealist is unwilling to moderate his demands in order that he may at least go some way towards realizing

¹⁴ Schiller, 1993: 254.

it. He overlooks the possibility of improving reality through “small-scale accomplishments” because he sees no point in acting upon mere “fragments,” when the *whole* of reality is so radically defective in comparison with his ideals: “What he demands of himself is something infinite, but everything he accomplishes is limited.”¹⁵ This description applies remarkably well to the Byronic hero, whose ironic detachment and self-absorption are bound up with the suggestion that he need not bother himself with trifles because such things are beneath him. To the humble concern of the chamois hunter, who entreats him to have patience and trust that things may yet turn out for the best, Manfred replies: “Patience and patience! Hence—that word was made / For brutes of burthen, not for birds of prey; / Preach it to mortals of a dust like thine, — / I am not of thine order.”¹⁶

Here we are recalled to the Underground Man and his impossible delusions of grandeur “in the style of Manfred.”¹⁷ This theme is echoed by Dostoevsky not only in *Notes from Underground*, but also in an article for the journal *Time*. Dostoevsky recalls a species of “idealists” that prevailed during the 1840s in Russia, who, in point of fact, he labels “Byronic natures.” These represent the worst moral pitfalls of idealism, which in their case causes them to become utterly contemptuous of real-life problems. According to Dostoevsky, they “took Byronism further” than Byron himself, presumably because the latter remained an idealist to the end—he died in Greece, on his way to fight for the noble cause of Greek independence—while his Russian descendants became so disillusioned that their idealism became entirely perverted: “they mostly sat about twiddling their thumbs,” because they claimed that “things were so bad it was a waste of time even to move a finger and that a good dinner was best of all.”¹⁸

¹⁵ Schiller, 1993: 255.

¹⁶ Byron, 2000: 287.

¹⁷ Dostoevsky, 2001: 40f.

¹⁸ Dostoevsky, 1964: 67.

3.1. Onegin and Pechorin

Dostoevsky's analysis of such "Byronic natures" continues elsewhere, in his discussion of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* (serialized 1825-1832), which he reads as a peculiarly Russian development of this problem. As stated above, Pushkin was strongly influenced by Byron; the "Bard of Pride" is mentioned several times in *Eugene Onegin*, the titular hero of which is an avid reader of Byron's poetry and is plainly a Byronic character himself.¹⁹ The fact that Dostoevsky commented on this work illuminates the aspects of Russian Byronism that he drew upon in *Notes from Underground*.

Dostoevsky explicitly blames Onegin's Byronism on the problem of human dignity imported from the West: "Civilization brought its fruits and we began to understand a little what it meant to be a man and what his significance and dignity amounted to, that is, in accordance with the conceptions that Europe had worked out."²⁰ The Western ideal of human dignity brought with it the problem of nihilism—the Enlightenment was, as we have seen, regarded both as the pinnacle of human civilization and at the same time the greatest threat to human dignity because it came part and parcel with a harsh critique of traditional cultural values. Onegin discovered what "his significance and dignity amounted to" but, at the same time, discovered that this dignity was chimerical. The fruits of European civilization thus left the Russian intellectual with nothing to do but devote himself to "skeptical self-contemplation and self-examination"²¹—Onegin longs for "something that cannot be destroyed by any skepticism or irony" (something, as the Underground Man puts it, that he cannot stick out his tongue at), but because he cannot find anything which might satisfy this longing, he despairs.²²

Though philosophical and psychological problems are not, perhaps, at the forefront of Pushkin's concerns in *Eugene Onegin*, he does indeed provide a diagnosis of

¹⁹ Pushkin, 2008: 28, 31, 59, 153.

²⁰ Dostoevsky, 1964: 146.

²¹ Dostoevsky, 1964: 146.

²² Dostoevsky, 1964: 148.

Onegin's Byronism at the source suggested by Dostoevsky: namely, nihilism and the problem of human dignity. He complains that "having fought all prejudices" each person is now completely egoistic, morally degraded, and views other people as "two-legged creatures in their millions" to be exploited and discarded; values like love, honour and genuine friendship are thus impossible to sustain.²³ This theme is illustrated in the main narrative of the poem: Onegin rejects the love of Tatiana and kills his best friend in a duel for no good reason at all, but simply out of his own egotism, self-absorption and stubborn haughtiness — traits sustained by his nihilistic inability to recognise the virtues of others or cultivate virtues in himself. As in Byron's *Cain*, nihilistic disillusionment leads to emotional isolation and, indeed, the rejection of love and a senseless murder.

Dostoevsky also recognizes in Onegin other Byronic traits that he would later grant to the Underground Man, including irony, self-mockery and masochism: "His conscience whispered to him that he led a futile kind of existence; he felt the stirring of spiteful irony within him,"²⁴ and this spiteful irony turned back upon the very ideals which had spurred him on in his quest for "a new truth," and which had originally filled him with a special sense of his human dignity: "he had become embittered and respected neither himself nor his ideas and views; he did not respect even the passion for life and truth which was in him."²⁵ Here we see a precursor to the Underground Man's ironic regrets at not having become a self-satisfied glutton like his friend "the connoisseur of Lafite." For Dostoevsky, Onegin commends himself bitterly to a life of self-indulgence, but finds that he cannot even rest content in that: "He became an egoist and yet," like the Underground Man, "at the same time, laughed at himself for not being able to be even a good egotist. Oh, if only he could be a real egotist, he would find peace of mind!"²⁶ It is precisely because of his "heightened consciousness," however, that he cannot have peace of mind and cannot settle peacefully into a certain

²³ Pushkin, 2008: 40.

²⁴ Dostoevsky, 1964: 147.

²⁵ Dostoevsky, 1964: 148.

²⁶ Dostoevsky, 1964: 148.

mode of life. Again, it is noteworthy that Onegin's disillusionment does not lead to caprice in *Sturm und Drang* fashion, but rather to languorous Byronic spleen, "With his embittered, seething mind / To futile enterprise consigned."²⁷

In his essays, Dostoevsky also mentions the other great Byronic character of Russian romantic literature, Pechorin, the title character of Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time* (1840). "In Pechorin," he writes, the phenomenon of Byronism "reached the point of unquenchable, jaundiced spite of a strange and to the highest degree original and Russian contrariness of two heterogeneous elements: egotism to the point of self-adoration and, at the same time, spiteful disrespect of oneself."²⁸ Needless to say, this masochistic egotism has a philosophical dimension. Von Gronicka suggests that "this schizoid state of Pechorin's personality" is what makes him an especially fitting illustration of Russia at that time, "whose intellectual climate was inextricably compounded of a Mephistophelean cynical analysis of life and of self and a Faustian restlessness and yearning after high ideals, doomed to remain unsatisfied."²⁹ Although both Dostoevsky and Von Gronicka are surely guilty of exaggerating the *Russianness* of this phenomenon, it is also true that Byronism was taken to what might be called its logical conclusion by Pushkin and Lermontov, and in such a way as to set the tone of the post-Byronic literature that followed in their wake.

3.2. Faust

This trend may have started in Pushkin's short but highly suggestive "Scene from Faust" (1828).³⁰ The basic theme of this dramatic fragment is Faust's boredom. Faust demands entertainment, but Mephisto begins instead to lecture him sarcastically on the inevitability of boredom and the wisdom of resignation. Faust tries to protest, recalling the bliss of his relations with Gretchen, so Mephisto teases him about the

²⁷ Pushkin, 2008: 153.

²⁸ Dostoevsky, 1964: 148.

²⁹ Von Gronicka, 1985, vol. 1: 91f.

³⁰ Pushkin, 2007: 93-98.

emptiness of all his former pleasures, even his love, and about the pervasive undercurrent of boredom that has always corrupted his enjoyments; Faust becomes exacerbated and orders the demon to leave him in peace. In a slick reversal of roles that Faust seems not to notice, Mephistopheles begs for some task to keep him busy, and Faust, in a chilling display of total apathy, commands him to sink a ship full of sailors—the first thing he happens to notice on the horizon.³¹

Critics have noticed that Pushkin's Faust is more disillusioned than Goethe's; he seems to have given up on goodness altogether, where the latter continued striving until the very end.³² According to Caryl Emerson, Pushkin's "Faust" fragment can best be understood not as a sequel to Goethe's, but as an "outgrowing" or "testing" of his own Byronism; his Faust resembles Byron's Manfred, except that his "disillusionment and solitary, rebellious pride have now gone further and into even blacker regions."³³ Von Gronicka finds additionally that Pushkin's version of Faust is somewhat more like Goethe's Mephistopheles, a barren soul without any of the idealistic striving that continues to spur Goethe's Faust into his action despite every setback and disappointment:

Goethe's Faust is bored only with those shallow pleasures which Mephisto serves up to him. The boredom of Pushkin's Faust is all-encompassing. It springs from utter satiety, a hyperintellectualism that sick-lies over every emotion and nips in the bud every stirring to creative action.³⁴

It seems to me that these interpretations are somewhat one-sided, and overlook the fact that Pushkin's Faust puts up an impassioned—if altogether brief—opposition to Mephisto's philosophy of boredom. He himself prefers to remain hopeful, and rebukes the devil sternly for exacerbating doubts he would rather not dwell upon:

³¹ Pushkin, 2007: 98.

³² Shaw, 2010: 32.

³³ Pushkin, 2007: xx. Cf. Von Gronicka, 1985, vol. 1: 70.

³⁴ Von Gronicka, 1985, vol. 1: 69.

"Speak no more! / You aggravate my secret woe."³⁵ This indicates that Pushkin's Faust, like Goethe's, has not ceased to dream and strive, even if—again like Goethe's Faust—he feels deep down that his striving is futile; his very boredom is indeed a clear sign that he has not at all been sated. Granted, he does partake of gratuitous murder and destruction, which is certainly alien to the spirit of Goethe's drama. But the order is given not as the directive of a cold-blooded mass-murderer, but like the tantrum of a spoilt child who has been denied amusement and then outwitted by his nanny. This reading is encouraged by the way in which Faust opens the scene, childishly begging for distraction: "Demon, I'm bored." Assuming the role of a babysitter intent on provoking and making fun of the headstrong child, Mephisto puts Faust in his place: "What of it, Faust? / For that's the lot you've been assigned, / And none beyond his lot may go."³⁶ The whole dialogue continues in this vein.

Nevertheless, whilst I would argue that Pushkin's Faust is not the spiritual vacuum that he is typically taken to be, I agree with previous commentators that he represents a Byronic or post-Byronic transformation of Goethe's hero. In emphasizing Faust's childlike immaturity, Pushkin is pursuing a definite strategy. The Byronic hero, as we have seen, suffers from a heightening of the disillusionment that afflicted *Sturm und Drang* heroes like Faust; as I said above, he possesses a higher degree of self-consciousness. It is in this sense that Pushkin's "Faust" fragment is Byronic. In regarding Goethe's Faust as a child he positions himself at a higher level of intellectual development (or "heightened consciousness," as the Underground Man would say), from where he can see that Faust's disillusionment was really par for the course, and that having reached full maturity he is in a position to know just how naive Faust was for being so upset about it. It is as if Pushkin were implying that Goethe's *Faust* was child's play—that Goethe had barely skimmed the surface of disillusionment, whereas he, Pushkin, has plumbed the depths, and confronted a world so bleak and devoid of meaning that a man can destroy three hundred sailors on a whim. Pushkin

³⁵ Pushkin, 2007: 96.

³⁶ Pushkin, 2007: 95.

presents this terrible event as an unremarkable happenstance, without commentary or further elaboration, as if he—like his Faust—were affecting not to care either way. He thereby challenges both Goethe and Byron in a spirit of one-upmanship whereby, at each stage, the increasingly world-weary idealist looks back on his predecessors and mocks the comparative naivety of their disillusionment.

* * *

Thus it is with Russian Byronism the theme of disillusionment in romanticism reaches its fullest development; this was the starting point of subsequent Russian literature. Pushkin's "Scene from Faust" establishes a trend that leads, as we shall see, to progressively harsher mockery of the disillusioned idealist. Works such as *Eugene Onegin* and *A Hero of Our Time* subject the flaws of their heroes to a psychological and moral scrutiny that reveals their authors' own disillusionment with Byronism itself—they had become disillusioned with the culture of disillusionment. As Lermontov says in the preface to his novel, Pechorin is a "portrait composed of the flaws of our whole generation in their fullest development."³⁷ He states that the novel has a moralizing purpose, and refers sarcastically to those of his audience who have been "fed on sweets" and still believe in the heroism of tragic and romantic scoundrels. He thinks the realism of his depiction should have a medicinal effect on the society whose vices he is depicting. Thus Lermontov's novel—the first great Russian psychological novel—is an attempt to expose the *reality* of romanticism, to subvert the cult of romanticism (in particular, Byronism) by exposing its real psychological foundations and implications. The irony of the work is that Lermontov puts nothing in the place of Pechorin's Byronism, but only a higher order of disillusionment that recognizes its own folly, and, like Pushkin in his "Faust," looks down on those who have not attained such insight; thus he does not escape the Byronic malaise, but only raises it to a higher power. In the same preface, indeed, he compares *himself* to Byron and denies any motivation for writing beyond his own whim and pleasure, as if to imply that the

³⁷ Lermontov, 2009: 2.

“moral” of his story is a joke: the common man is a fool for thinking that his affected Byronism is anything to be proud of, Pechorin is a fool for thinking that he is any better, and he, Lermontov, is himself a fool for thinking that he has attained a summit from which to look down on them all and moralize; the dialectic of naivety and disillusionment is never-ending. In both of these respects—the psychological critique and mockery of romanticism, and an irony that undermines its own aims—*A Hero of Our Time* is an important precursor not only to *Notes from Underground*, but to several other works of fiction to be considered below.

Above, I have outlined the main features of Byronic literature in their relation to the problem of disillusionment. In this context, we have begun to observe the difference between, on the one hand, the treatment of disillusioned idealism in *Sturm und Drang* literature and *Notes from Underground* and, on the other hand, its treatment in Byronic literature. As we have seen, in the former contexts disillusionment is associated with the phenomenon of caprice, while in the latter it is associated not with caprice but rather with what we can call “spleen.” To be sure, *Notes from Underground* draws as much on Byronism as the *Sturm und Drang*, especially in its characterization of the Underground Man as inert, sarcastic and spiteful—indeed, as splenetic. But whilst it is important to recognize the Underground Man’s Byronic traits, our concern in this dissertation is to understand his caprice, and we have now begun to see both why and to what extent this interest should lead us back to the *Sturm und Drang* movement specifically.

4. Herzen and Turgenev

Like Pushkin and Lermontov, Alexander Herzen stood on the cusp of the transition from romantic idealism to realism and was especially interested in the disillusioning effects of this transition on the Russian intellectual. Herzen’s works, both fictional and nonfictional, are fundamental to the next stage of the historical development under

consideration. He was one of the foremost radical intellectuals of the nineteenth century, and having come into conflict with Russian authorities, emigrated to London, from where he ran the Free Russian Press and campaigned for political progress and freedom of speech. Nevertheless, he had been nourished on romanticism and German Idealist philosophy, and his treatments of the theme of disillusioned idealism are especially illuminating as a result of his own ambivalent attitudes and commitments.

4.1. From the Other Shore

Herzen's *From the Other Shore* (1848-1850), written in the disheartening aftermath of the failed 1848 revolutions, is the "most considered expression of [Herzen's] mature moral and social philosophy," and an important document in the tradition of Russian thought under consideration.³⁸ In it Herzen examines the two main attitudes at war within the intelligentsia of his own generation: an increasingly disillusioned idealism and a (sometimes reluctant) awareness that a more realistic attitude must take its place. It is a sustained engagement with the same problems that, as we have seen, motivated works of the *Sturm und Drang*, German Idealism, Byronism, as well as *Notes from Underground*: the problem of idealistic yearning in an age of nihilistic disillusionment; the problem of how best to orient one's striving relative to one's ideals and to a reality that is apparently hostile to them.

In Byronism, romantic idealism was embittered and ironic; it then gave way, in the realist literature that followed, to mockery and censure that saw it as a stupid and dangerous attitude towards life and, in particular, politics. In *From the Other Shore*, Herzen was writing some time after the Byronic attitude went out of fashion, and regards idealism not through the lens of haughty Byronic irony, but with sad nostalgia. In his youth, he had been an ardent idealist, but now feels that he must shed the remnants of his youthful dreams if he is to continue striving and working in the latter half of the nineteenth century: "is poetry perhaps a disease of mankind," Heine asked,

³⁸ Kelly, 2016: 341.

“as the pearl is really only a morbid substance from which the poor oyster beast is suffering?”³⁹ The same standpoint is captured by Belinsky in a review of Russian literature:

Who of us in his youth has not dreamed, harboured illusions, and chased mirages, and who has not been disappointed in them? Who has escaped paying for these disappointments with heartburnings, anguish, and apathy, and who has not later laughed heartily at all these things? Healthy natures, however, only gain from this practical logic of life and experience; they develop and mature morally. It is the romanticists that perish from it.⁴⁰

At the heart of Herzen's *From the Other Shore* is a dialogue between a realist, a “healthy nature” resigned yet resolute in the face of historical developments he now admits he cannot control, and a recalcitrant idealist, who—anticipating the Underground Man—chooses proudly to suffer continuous disappointment, and a kind of ongoing martyrdom, to “perish” rather than capitulate to necessity. Herzen apparently identifies with the former, but shows evident sympathy for the idealist, who—as Dostoevsky remarked when he met Herzen in London⁴¹—often seems to gain the upper hand over his interlocutor, thereby revealing the conflict of attitudes within Herzen himself as he struggles to divest himself of unrealistic aspirations.

The general tenor of the dialogue is established early on. The realist: “I should not say that my present point of view is a particularly consoling one, but I have grown calmer: I have stopped being angry with life because it does not give what it cannot give—that is all I have managed to achieve.” The idealist: “As for me, I do not want to stop being angry or suffering; this is so much a human right that I should not dream of surrendering it; my indignation is my protest; I do not want to make peace.” The realist: “[...] You mean that you do not want to accept the truth as it is revealed to you by your own thought—perhaps it would not demand suffering from you. You

³⁹ Heine, 2002: 77.

⁴⁰ Matlaw, 1976: 62f.

⁴¹ Frank, 1986: 191.

repudiate all logic in advance—you give yourself the right to accept or reject consequences as you choose.”⁴²

Herzen describes the inevitability of doubting and criticizing received opinions and traditional values; he acknowledges the compulsion of rationality, the necessity of “two times two is four.” But, having lived through the age of romanticism, he also acknowledges the difficulty of abandoning the convictions of one’s childhood and youth, and the inevitable pain that accompanies doubt and critique. The conflict between reason and faith, progress and tradition, realism and idealism, is nigh insurmountable, and calls for great fortitude: “I choose knowledge, and,” he writes, “let it deprive me of the last consolation, I will wander as a moral pauper through the world, but the childish hopes, the youthful dreams must be torn out by the roots. Off with them to the bar of incorruptible reason!”⁴³ And yet, as he also says, “There are few nervous disorders more recalcitrant than idealism.”⁴⁴

All of this is highly redolent of *Notes from Underground*. Passages like the following clearly adumbrate the preoccupations of the Underground Man:⁴⁵

[W]e are unable to organize either the inner or the outer life, that we demand too much, sacrifice too much, scorn the possible, are indignant because what is impossible scorns us. We rebel against the natural conditions of life, and submit to every kind of arbitrary nonsense. All our civilization is like that, it has developed in the midst of internecine moral strife; breaking out from the schools and monasteries, it did not emerge into life, but sauntered through it, like Faust, merely to take a look at it, to reflect upon it, and then to withdraw from the rude mob into *salons*, academies and books. It has made the whole journey under two banners: “Romanticism for the heart” was inscribed on one, “Idealism for the mind” on the other. That is where the greater part of the disorder of our lives comes from. We do not like the simple, we do not

⁴² Herzen, 1979: 20.

⁴³ Herzen, 1979: 49.

⁴⁴ Herzen, 1979: 73.

⁴⁵ Compare especially with the conclusion of Dostoevsky’s novel (Dostoevsky, 2001: 90f.). It has been recognized that *From the Other Shore* was hugely important for Dostoevsky, and influenced *Notes from Underground* directly (Frank, 1986: 190f.; Kelly, 1991: 405, 415).

respect nature as we ought, we want to order her about, we want to cure her by magic spells, and are then surprised that the patient is no better; medicine offends us by its independence and self-sufficiency; we want alchemy, magic, but life and nature go their ways indifferent, submitting to man only to the extent to which he has learnt to work by their very methods.⁴⁶

The Underground Man illustrates all of these ideas and attitudes—not forgetting to take offence at medicine, refusing to consult doctors out of spite, and boiling over at the thought that his happiness depends on the whims of his teeth and the dentist Wagenheim! And, just like Herzen’s bitter idealist, he is well aware of the untenability of his own position but persists regardless, unwilling to capitulate because so much is at stake—human dignity itself. Herzen’s penetrating study of disillusionment, and of the intractability of the conflict between idealism and realism, correlates with the literary type he himself did much to establish: the “superfluous man.”

4.2. Superfluous Men

As stated above, there is a sense in which Russian Byronism contained its own critique—it dealt harshly with its heroes as victims of a kind of disorder, and thereby laid the foundations for such attacks on idealism and romanticism as *From the Other Shore*. Von Gronicka traces this shift to Pushkin’s “Faust” fragment; in radicalizing Faust’s boredom to such an extent that he himself becomes Mephistophelean, and the remnants of his idealistic striving are overwhelmed by spleen, Pushkin put his Faust “at the head of a long line of typically Russian heroes—his own Onegin, Lermontov’s Pechorin, Turgenev’s Rudin, Goncharov’s Oblomov, all those ‘superfluous people’ whose incurable malaise is that very boredom, that ennui experienced so poignantly by Pushkin’s Faust.”⁴⁷ Edmund Kostka also regards the “Scene from Faust” as the “fountainhead” of the superfluous man tradition.⁴⁸ As Russian intellectual culture

⁴⁶ Herzen, 1979: 24.

⁴⁷ Von Gronicka, 1985, vol. 1: 70.

⁴⁸ Kostka, 1975: 119. Belinsky regarded Pushkin’s Faust as a genealogical link between Shakespeare’s Hamlet, Goethe’s Faust and Pechorin (Orwin, 2007: 20).

shifted towards realism and social criticism in the 1840s, therefore, romanticism had already paved the way for its own obsolescence. In order to complete the destruction of romantic idealism, it remained only for the intelligentsia to change its tone: where the Byronic anti-heroes of Pushkin and Lermontov were presented as deeply flawed but charismatic, their successors in Russian literature were increasingly unattractive and ultimately despicable, pitiable or ridiculous.

What's more, the aspirations of those naive idealists who had not yet become entirely despondent were subjected to harsh ridicule and belittled. Idealism is even diagnosed as a physical ailment by Herzen's level-headed Doctor Krupov:

"But it is rather unpleasant," said the relentless Dr. Krupov, "to be a creature endowed with a lofty nature and still be obliged to live no higher and no higher than on earth. I confess that I consider such 'loftiness' a physical disorder or an attack of nerves. Take cold sponge baths and get more exercise, and half of your starry-eyed fantasies will disappear."⁴⁹

Pure-hearted idealism was thus rooted out of Russian literature and replaced by a particularly downtrodden and self-deprecating strain of Byronism. This was the theme of the "superfluous man," described by Herzen in his 1846 novel *Who is To Blame?* and elaborated by Turgenev in "The Diary of a Superfluous Man" (1850), "The Hamlet of Shchigrovsky District" in *Sketches from a Hunter's Album* (1852) and *Rudin* (1856).⁵⁰ Depictions of "superfluous men" in these stories became increasingly unflattering. As Isaiah Berlin wrote of *Who is To Blame?*:

[Herzen's best novel] deals with a situation common enough at that time—of a rich and unhappy young Russian landowner (the 'superfluous man') vainly struggling against his environment, a figure to become celebrated later in the novels of Herzen's contemporaries, Goncharov, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, but especially Turgenev—the prototype of many a Russian Hamlet, too idealistic and too honest to accept the

⁴⁹ Herzen, 1984: 199f. Cf. Chernyshevsky, 1989: 251: "No spiritual travail can withstand a sufficient dose of morphine."

⁵⁰ For a general overview of this tradition, see Chances, 1978 and Seeley, 1994: 1-40.

squalor and the lies of conventional society, too weak and too civilized to work effectively for their destruction, and consequently displaced from his proper function and doomed to poison his own life and the lives of others by neurotic behaviour induced by the vices of a society which sins against the moral ideals which the author holds dear, a society either irremediably corrupt, or still capable of regeneration, according to the author's social or religious beliefs.⁵¹

Here the romantic hero has become further downgraded, losing even the dark fascination of the Byronic hero, and ceasing to be *romantic* and a *hero* altogether. His intellectual superiority now counts for nothing because he is weak-willed, vacillating and indecisive, and a useless burden on those around him. At the time of his creation, the Underground Man stood at the furthest extreme of this development—many more of his attributes come into being in Turgenev's variations on the superfluous man theme, especially his "Hamlet" type, which appeared in the preceding decade.⁵²

In her monograph study of his characters, Eva Kagan-Kans has commented on the similarity of the Turgenev's "Hamlets" and Dostoevsky's Underground Man.⁵³ Her description of the former is equally applicable to the latter, and goes to show the importance of Turgenev's characters in the genealogy of the Underground Man:

[The Hamlet type's] basic traits are his egotism, lack of faith, and the self-analysis which inevitably accompanies these attitudes. Nothing in life can command his devotion, and he is preoccupied solely by his own ego and his own condition of life. Doubting everything, he also doubts himself; having no ideal, he is inspired by an irony directed primarily at himself. [...] Hamlet's doubts and reflections [...] paralyze his will and render him incapable of action.⁵⁴

Here we have the "heightened consciousness" and concomitant inertia of the Underground Man, Byronic traits that have, so to speak, atrophied and lost their heroic

⁵¹ Herzen, 1979: ix.

⁵² Peace, 1992: 212f.

⁵³ Kagan-Kans, 1975: 34ff.

⁵⁴ Kagan-Kans, 1975: 10.

charm in the backwaters of provincial Russia. Further similarities abound. The narrator of Turgenev's *Diary of a Superfluous Man*, Chulkaturin, claims just like the Underground Man that he is writing only for himself, out of a personal compulsion;⁵⁵ both are paralyzed by endless self-examination that is vented in the form of solitary literary reflections. Thus, Chulkaturin too complains of an impenetrable barrier between his feelings and his thoughts, which he himself associates with excessive self-regard.⁵⁶ As is typical of the post-Byronic egoism of both characters, this obsessive self-analysis and the internal disharmony it creates also leads to interpersonal difficulties in both works. Perhaps not coincidentally, the love interest is called Liza in both, and each of the narrators is prevented from establishing a meaningful relationship with his Liza by virtue of his "bookishness," his inability to express his personality spontaneously and without artifice, irony or mockery.⁵⁷ "Farewell, Liza!" writes Chulkaturin, "I've just written these two words and almost burst out laughing. They sound so bookish. It's as if I were composing some sentimental story or ending a letter of despair..."⁵⁸ The combined influence of his immersion in romantic literature and, stemming from disillusionment with the ideals of this literature, of his ruthless self-examination and self-mockery has entirely robbed Chulkaturin of the ability to engage naturally with his own feelings, or to express them naturally to others.

Overall, Turgenev's contribution to the tradition under discussion can be seen primarily as a further development of the Byronic and post-Byronic themes in Russian literature; his "Hamlets" and "superfluous men" continue the trend begun by Pushkin and Lermontov insofar as they further strip the idealistic hero of heroic traits, to the extent that he is no longer a hero at all, and so conscious of his own irremediable insignificance that he can hardly be thought of as an idealist either. In all respects

⁵⁵ Turgenev, 1999: 32.

⁵⁶ Turgenev, 1999: 33.

⁵⁷ Both Lizas refer to Karamzin's story "Poor Liza," in which the nobleman Erast is drawn to poor Liza purely because of his sentimental, "bookish" inclinations, calling her his "shepherdess"; as soon as she loses her innocence to him, he loses interest in her (Karamzin, 2012).

⁵⁸ Turgenev, 1999: 71.

pertaining to these developments, works like the *Diary of a Superfluous Man* should be viewed as having a direct influence on *Notes from Underground*.

5. Gogol and Goncharov

It is important to consider two further literary figures, both of whom contributed significantly to the traditional theme of disillusionment in Russian literature: Nikolai Gogol and Ivan Goncharov. The former is interesting here insofar as he had a strong influence on Dostoevsky's characterization of disillusioned idealism, the latter as an example of an entirely different approach.

5.1. Nevsky Prospect

Generally speaking, Gogol is significant to the present investigation in two ways. On the one hand, in much of his fiction he depicted ordinary Russians—especially bureaucrats, as in *The Government Inspector* (1836) and *Dead Souls* (1842)—in a highly unflattering light.⁵⁹ He thereby contributed markedly to the general disillusionment of Russian literature itself, or the shift from romanticism to realism. Dostoevsky's debt to Gogol is most obvious in his early fiction; in *Poor Folk*, for example, the minor bureaucrat Makar Devushkin reads Gogol's story "The Overcoat" and is humiliated by the brutally honest depiction of the character type on which he himself is modelled.⁶⁰ As we shall see, however, Gogol's influence is no less pronounced in the representation of disillusionment in *Notes from Underground*. His vision of Russia—and in particular, of Petersburg—is fundamental to Dostoevsky's portrayal of reality as an unsuitable arena for the realization of lofty goals.

⁵⁹ Gogol, 1995: 245-336; 1961.

⁶⁰ Dostoevsky, 1988(b): 66ff.

On the other hand, Gogol also depicted specific instances of disillusioned idealism, blending tragedy and comedy to expose the pathetic naivety of youthful romantics (or “Schillers,” as Dostoevsky would call them). The short story “Nevsky Prospect” (1835) is an excellent example of this. The story follows the separate misadventures of two friends—the shy, sensitive artist Piskaryov and the brash army officer Pirogov—in their ill-fated attempts to pursue two women who catch their respective eyes one day on Nevsky Prospect. It is the story of Piskaryov, a kind of deflated parable on the contrast between dreams and reality, that interests us here. Gogol’s introduction of Piskaryov signals the fate that awaits him in the reality of Saint Petersburg:

This young man belonged to that class which constitutes one of the stranger phenomena of our life and which has as little in common with the usual citizens of St Petersburg as a person seen in a dream has with the real world. This unique class is most remarkable in a city where everyone is a civil servant, a shopkeeper, or a German craftsman. Our young man was an artist.⁶¹

For Gogol, Petersburg represents a world that is positively incapable of satisfying the spiritual needs of a lover of the sublime and the beautiful. It is this banal, Gogolian Petersburg that the Underground Man, too, inhabits. On Pirogov’s prompting, Piskaryov rushes off after the young brunette who caught his eye. Assuming that this model of beauty is a noble lady, he can hardly believe that she seems to be smiling at him and leading him on—ironically, he suspects that he must be dreaming—but he follows her, all the way to an unexpectedly run-down establishment, and discovers that she is in fact a prostitute. Unable to cope with this turn of events, he runs home in despair. When he falls asleep, however, he dreams of the young woman, and in his dream she really is a wealthy and enigmatic lady of the highest society; unaware that he is dreaming, he wonders how this turn of events can be reconciled with his earlier experience at the bordello.⁶² Upon his waking, all becomes clear, but Piskaryov is far from satisfied: “Oh, how repulsive was reality! How could he face it after his

⁶¹ Gogol, 1995: 9.

⁶² Gogol, 1995: 15.

dream!”⁶³ Piskaryov’s reaction is not to capitulate, but instead to reject reality entirely; he wants only to sleep and to return to his dream. When he next falls asleep, though, he dreams “some vile, banal dream” about “some functionary, who was at one and the same time a functionary and a bassoon.”⁶⁴ Like Gogol’s more bizarre tales, such as “The Nose” and the “Diary of a Madman,”⁶⁵ Piskaryov’s exaggeratedly “banal” dreams serve as irritating, offensive foils for the ideal. Piskaryov longs for something, as the Underground Man would say, at which he cannot stick out his tongue.

Eventually, the lady reappears in his dreams; Piskaryov begins to see her every night. He uses opium to prolong and enhance his encounters. Then, inspired by visions of marriage, he forms the plan of going to see her in reality and rescuing her from the life he assumes she—a noble lady at heart—must be desperate to escape from. Naturally, the attempt to realize his dreams is disastrous; the women merely laugh at his suggestion of marriage and the life of honest hardship he offers as an alternative to prostitution. Driven mad by the sheer vulgarity of the real woman corresponding to the ideal of his imagination, he commits suicide. Gogol’s warning that Piskaryov “has as little in common with the usual citizens of St Petersburg as a person seen in a dream has with the real world” proves true: he is literally incapable of surviving outside his dreams, killed “by his refusal to accept reality on its own terms.”⁶⁶

The sad fate of Piskaryov is juxtaposed against the ensuing tale of the shallow and self-satisfied Pirogov, which is entirely comic and serves to illustrate what Gogol means by “the usual citizens of St Petersburg.” Having parted ways with Piskaryov, Pirogov follows a different woman back to the workshop of a German craftsman, her husband. The ensuing scene is characteristic of Gogol’s method of playfully inverting the priorities of romanticism by way of exaggerated, ridiculous banality:

⁶³ Gogol, 1995: 19.

⁶⁴ Gogol, 1995: 19.

⁶⁵ Gogol, 1995: 37-61, 158-178.

⁶⁶ Seeley, 1994: 118.

Before him sat Schiller—not Schiller who wrote *Wilhelm Tell* and the *History of the Thirty Years' War*, but another Schiller, one tinsmith residing at Meshchanskaya Street. Beside Schiller stood Hofmann—not Hofmann the writer, but a rather good shoemaker from Offiterskaya Street, and a good friend of Schiller's.⁶⁷

Such apparently innocuous comic flourishes are part of a general campaign to expose everything that, from the perspective of idealistic romanticism, is shameful, seamy or—what is the same thing from the romantic perspective—merely *banal* about the real world.⁶⁸ Schiller and Hofmann the craftsmen, like the dentist Wagenheim, are emblems of this offensive banality. For Belinsky, this meant that “Gogol strictly adheres to the sphere of Russian *everyday* reality in his works.”⁶⁹ Whether or not Gogol wanted to play the role of social critic that Belinsky and the progressive intelligentsia foisted upon him, it is true that in his tales stripped of all romantic pretensions—indeed, calculated to offend the romantic sensibilities—he certainly contributed to the decline of romanticism described at the end of Chapter 8, and the rise of the “Natural School” of anti-romantic realism.⁷⁰ In this way, he contributed to the progressive deflation of the superfluous man into the object of contempt or pity depicted by Herzen, Turgenev and Goncharov.

5.2. The Same Old Story

For Goncharov, disillusionment was a particular specialty: he made it the primary theme of all three of his novels, *The Same Old Story*, *Oblomov* and *The Precipice* (published in 1847, 1859 and 1869 respectively). The former two were highly influential and, since they preceded *Notes from Underground*, worthy of consideration here. As

⁶⁷ Gogol, 1995: 27.

⁶⁸ “[Pushkin] always told me that no other writer has the gift of representing the banality of life so clearly” (Gogol, 1969: 103).

⁶⁹ Matlaw, 1976: 13.

⁷⁰ Harper, 1956: 402.

stated, Goncharov's treatment of disillusionment is interesting to the present investigation inasmuch as it is, in certain respects, diametrically opposed to Dostoevsky's.

Goncharov's first novel follows the love affairs, and concomitant emotional tribulations, of an aspiring poet called Alexander Aduyev. Alexander, who has led a sheltered and pampered life on his family estate, arrives in Saint Petersburg to seek the assistance of his estranged uncle, Pyotr Ivanovich, in building his career and establishing himself as a man of letters. The disillusionment he experiences in Petersburg is a predictable consequence of his inexperience, his unrealistic expectations, and the quasi-Mephistophelean influence of his uncle, a principled nihilist. Pyotr Ivanovich denies the existence of love and fellowship traditionally conceived, endeavours to be entirely egoistic, abides by an entirely utilitarian ethics, and is no less harsh on idealism than the utopian and revolutionary Nihilists who came after him; unlike the Nihilists, however, he does not regard the improvement of society as the inevitable consequence of his own egoism. He is a wealthy capitalist with no interest in political or economic upheaval. He enjoys the finer things, the best wine, even poetry and literature—Alexander is dumbfounded to learn that he knows some Pushkin by heart—but he seems to enjoy them only as sources of animal pleasure and not as flights of human spirit.⁷¹ In all of these respects, he is the exact antithesis of his nephew and is glad to oversee the failure of Alexander's career as a poet and of several disastrous love affairs—he regards these disappointments as highly salutary for the young idealist.

One of the most illustrative scenes is also, I think, one that exerted a strong influence on Dostoevsky.⁷² His heart having been broken for the first time, Alexander goes to his uncle to unburden himself. Of course, Pyotr Ivanovich is the last person to offer emotional comfort on such an occasion, and what ensues is a comic dialogue in which he systemically humiliates Alexander for his naivety. He knows that Alexander will be unable to countenance the idea of enjoying a meal at such a time, of gratifying the

⁷¹ Goncharov, 2015: 61.

⁷² Goncharov, 2015: 151-172.

body when the soul is in torment—“Eat supper! You won’t be able to swallow a thing either, when you know that this is a matter of life and death”—so he orders a meal and a bottle of expensive wine.⁷³ He eats with relish, continually interrupts his nephew’s outpourings with jokes, derisive remarks, and complaints about the temperature of his food and wine. This chapter is one of the clearest examples of a common theme in Russian literature: “The dichotomy between the naïve romantic dreamer and the sceptic of the transitional age,” Neuhauser remarks, “became an essential feature of the characterization of post-romantic heroes in the literature of the forties and fifties in Russia.”⁷⁴

I mentioned in Chapter 6 that Dostoevsky maintained this paradigm in several works, but it is in *Humiliated and Insulted* that he explores the dichotomy in a manner most reminiscent of Goncharov’s novel.⁷⁵ The young idealist Ivan Petrovich,⁷⁶ an aspiring writer (not unlike Alexander Aduyev), is taken for a meal and humiliated by the wealthy sensualist Prince Valkovsky. Echoing Goncharov, Ivan Petrovich is shocked that the Prince wants to have supper with him, his personal and ideological combatant: “I never have supper,” he says.⁷⁷ While enjoying the expensive meal and becoming increasingly drunk, Valkovsky mocks him for being a “Schiller” and takes pleasure in embarrassing his romantic sensibilities by revealing the most sordid aspects of his own personality.⁷⁸ As in *The Same Old Story*, and indeed in Goethe’s *Faust*, the

⁷³ Goncharov, 2015: 153.

⁷⁴ Neuhauser, 1974: 340.

⁷⁵ Dostoevsky, 2012: 240-259.

⁷⁶ That his name is the inverse of Pyotr Ivanovich’s is presumably coincidental—though not inappropriate, considering he is very much the opposite of Goncharov’s character.

⁷⁷ Dostoevsky, 2012: 240.

⁷⁸ “I really was ready to attack him. I was at the end of my tether. He seemed to me like some kind of a snake or a huge spider that I’d have liked to crush. [...] It seemed to me (and I was sure of this) that he derived some kind of enjoyment, even some kind of wanton pleasure, in his self-abasement and in the insolence, the cynicism with which he tore off his mask in front of me. He wanted to relish my surprise and my horror” (Dostoevsky, 2012: 246). The Underground Man discusses the very same kind of pleasure, which he associates with the nobleman who deliberately exaggerates the agonies of his toothache: “I’m no longer the hero I wanted to pass for earlier, but simply a nasty little man, a rogue. So be it! I’m delighted that you’ve seen through me” (Dostoevsky, 2001: 11). The act of “unmasking” is repeated in *Crime and Punishment* by the drunken Svidrigailov (Dostoevsky, 2003(b): 555-576).

mockers revels in exaggerating the contrast between the lofty and the vulgar, the spiritual and the bodily. In *Notes from Underground*, moreover, Dostoevsky explores the way this mocker-idealist dichotomy can operate within an individual person—the Underground Man *qua* sceptic mocks the Underground Man *qua* “Schiller” and derives a kind of masochistic pleasure from doing so. (It is perhaps noteworthy that the wine Pyotr Ivanovich conspicuously enjoys while mocking his nephew is a Lafite—the wine preferred by the Underground Man’s paragon of self-satisfied gluttony, the “connoisseur of Lafite” whose complacent sensuality he contrasts ironically with his own more exalted and pure-hearted sensibilities.⁷⁹)

Despite his uncle’s best efforts, the conflict between realism and idealism has predominantly negative effects on Alexander: “you created an inner conflict in me,” he says, “between two competing views of life and were unable to reconcile them—and what was the end result? I ended up wallowing in doubt—a total mess, Uncle!”⁸⁰ The psychological result of Alexander’s disillusionment, however, is neither *Sturm und Drang* caprice nor Byronic spleen, but anger, sadness and eventually resignation and reform. In the end, he devotes himself entirely to his uncle’s way of life (while Pyotr Ivanovich, ironically, shows signs of repenting and reforming in the opposite direction).⁸¹ Overall, then, the theme of disillusionment in *The Same Old Story* seems to have influenced Dostoevsky’s portrayal of “Schillers” and their antagonists, but not to have had any impact on the way in which he characterizes disillusionment or its consequences in *Notes from Underground*.

⁷⁹ Dostoevsky, 2001: 14. In an entirely different context—when discussing the difference between Russian and Western romantics—the Underground Man also mentions Pyotr Ivanovich by name (Dostoevsky, 2001: 32), along with Konstanzhoglo from Gogol’s *Dead Souls*, a prosperous landowner who also heaps scorn on noble but ineffectual aspirations (Gogol, 1961: 322ff.). The Underground Man here only states that the tendency of Russian critics to overestimate the “foolishness” of Russian romantics is due to their excessive esteem for anti-romantics like Pyotr Ivanovich and Konstanzhoglo.

⁸⁰ Goncharov, 2015: 303.

⁸¹ Goncharov, 2005: 347ff.

5.3. Oblomov

Goncharov's second novel addresses the theme of disillusionment in a more oblique and less contrived fashion. Whereas *The Same Old Story* illustrates the tribulations of a young idealist struggling to come to terms with reality, Oblomov—a pampered and completely inept nobleman—is introduced as someone who has long since ceased to aspire towards the ideals of his youth. The dichotomy between naive dreamer and man of action recurs, but without open antagonism: Oblomov relies on his beloved friend Stolz to arrange his life and take care of his estate, while the latter merely scolds and pleads with him to take steps to revitalize himself.

Oblomov suffers from a more literal variety of inertia than the Underground Man—he spends almost his entire life lounging about at home, overwhelmed by the exigencies of even the most basic tasks, and unable to perceive the advantage of taking any kind of decisive action whatever. Goncharov attributes Oblomov's inertia in part to his nobleman's upbringing,⁸² and in part to his nature: "Lying down was not for Oblomov a necessity, as it is for a sick man or for a man who is sleepy; or a matter of chance, as it is for a man who is tired; or a pleasure, as it is for a lazy man: it was his normal condition."⁸³ But it is evidently also a product of his predilection for day-dreaming; he indulges in fantasies, while every chance of actually realizing them slips away from him. Marriage seems a charming prospect to his romantic sensibilities, but as soon as it becomes an imminent possibility, something approaching a practical matter, he is terrified and withdraws.⁸⁴

Oblomov belongs in this respect to the tradition of the superfluous man. Indeed, for the radical critic Dobrolyubov, Oblomov was, to all intents and purposes, exactly the same kind of person as Onegin and Pechorin. At the end of the 1850s, he writes, the general audience has become fed up with empty talk and lofty rhetoric, irrespective of the form it takes: "But the crowd is right! Once it has realized that it is necessary to

⁸² Goncharov, 2005: 385.

⁸³ Goncharov, 2005: 14.

⁸⁴ Goncharov, 2005: 314, 320.

set to work in real earnest, it makes no difference to it whether a Pechorin or an Oblomov stands before it.”⁸⁵ He doesn’t deny that Onegin and Pechorin are very different from Oblomov in other respects, but only that they are identical in the one respect that now matters most, namely, the inability to work for the good of the nation. Dobrolyubov’s remarks seem perceptive: Goncharov’s novel does contribute to the general trend of deflating the image of the superfluous man and the disillusioned idealist more generally, who now appears at his most pitiful, “wearing a wide dressing gown instead of an austere cloak.”⁸⁶ Thanks to Dobrolyubov, Oblomov became a symbol of the depths to which the aging members of the romantic generation, sufferers of “Oblomovitis” or “Oblomovism” (обломовщина), had now fallen.

6. Return to the *Sturm und Drang*

This finally concludes our history of disillusioned idealism in the Byronic and realist Russian literature separating the *Sturm und Drang* movement both conceptually and temporally from the time of *Notes from Underground*. We have considered the various ingredients that Dostoevsky plucked from his nineteenth-century predecessors: from Byron, Pushkin and Lermontov, egotistical self-absorption and spite; from Herzen and Turgenev, the divesting of all heroism and grandeur from the Byronic hero, the vision of the “superfluous man” as a completely failed romantic, totally out of place in reality; from Goncharov, the confrontation between humiliated idealist and sceptical mocker, and the contrast between the inert mouse and the man of action; from Gogol, finally, the idea of Petersburg as a kind of spiritual and aesthetic void in which the name “Schiller” refers only to a binge-drinking tinsmith on Meshchanskaya Street.

At the outset of Chapter 8, I raised two questions. First, to what extent is the Underground Man a throwback to the *Sturm und Drang* movement specifically? Although

⁸⁵ Matlaw, 1976: 162.

⁸⁶ Matlaw, 1976: 163.

he belongs very much to his own time, he is—much more than any of his Russian literary cousins and forebears—also a throwback to their common ancestors, the heroes of the *Sturm und Drang* considered in Chapters 6 and 7. As we can see from the above survey, the Underground Man has something in common with Karl Moor and Faust that he does not share with any other major character belonging to the same lineage—he reacts *capriciously* to disillusionment. In this respect he is quite unlike Manfred, Cain, Onegin, Pechorin, Beltoz, Rudin, Chulkaturin, Piskaryov, Oblomov—all of whom are no less disillusioned, but none of whom express their disillusionment with such a mad yearning for absolute freedom.

If the Underground Man is a relation of such heroes as Karl Moor and Faust, as I have claimed, what explains the huge differences between these characters? Maybe they are all capricious, but the heroes of the *Sturm und Drang* were also brave, charismatic, awe-inspiring; the Underground Man is the opposite of all of these traits. How, then, am I justified in suggesting that Dostoevsky's narrator should be understood with reference to these characters? We are due an explanation of Dostoevsky's introduction of such a raft of differences, which, we may suppose, can only serve to obscure his allusions to Schiller and Goethe, and thus undermine his purpose as I have presented it. On the face of it, we may suppose that such differences are to be accounted for by the difference in literary tastes; after all, more than eighty years separate *The Robbers* from *Notes from Underground*. This is more than a matter of taste, however; Dostoevsky needed to ensure that his Underground Man was relevant to the specific concerns of his audience, so that his reaction to nihilism would make sense as the reaction of an ordinary Russian intellectual. Thus he transposed the *Sturm und Drang* into a new key.

What would a Karl Moor or a Götz von Berlichingen be like if transported into Russian literature in the 1860s, and made to conform to the expectations of realism and social commentary? He would not be so impulsive; an “educated man of the nineteenth century” would be far more circumspect. He would not be so powerful and charismatic, he would not be so wealthy and influential; such potentates are not

representative of real people. He would be no less intelligent, he would be well educated, but he would likely be a small- to middle-sized cog in the Gogolian bureaucracy. What would Faust be like? In the first place, he would be deprived of his magic powers; he would be deprived of Mephistopheles; he would have precious little to show for his intellectual ascendancy over Wagner—the latter would, in fact, be far better suited to life in Saint Petersburg and would excel him in the civil service. If the romantic, the dashing, the heroic, the gothic, the *unrealistic* trappings of these characters are stripped away, what remains is a parody of their former selves: their hopeless idealism would seem not tragic, but pitiful or ridiculous. In general, if the heroes of the *Sturm und Drang* were transposed, retaining only their basic interests and psychological characteristics, into a realistic setting of mid-nineteenth century Russia, the Underground Man would be the result.

The groundwork for such a transposition already existed in the works of Russian Byronism and their successors; the “superfluous man” is in each of his instances little more than a romantic hero stripped of heroism, left with only vague aspirations and a gnawing sense of inadequacy. Dobrolyubov rightly identified Oblomov as an extreme example of this trend: “His appearance would have been impossible had society, at least some section of it, not realized what nonentities all those quasi-talented natures are, which it had formerly admired.”⁸⁷ In Oblomov, the superfluous man appears in his true colours, “reclining on a soft couch instead of standing on a beautiful pedestal, wearing a wide dressing gown instead of an austere cloak.”⁸⁸ For Dostoevsky, it remained only to salvage from Schiller and Goethe the one characteristic that had been forgotten in the meantime—that is, caprice. Only in the *Sturm und Drang* and in *Notes from Underground* does the disillusionment of idealism lead to caprice; in the Byronic tradition of literature, as we have seen, caprice is absent. Since the Underground Man’s caprice is what we are ultimately trying to understand, my emphasis on the works of Schiller and Goethe, rather than any other source of inspiration for

⁸⁷ Matlaw, 1976: 163.

⁸⁸ Matlaw, 1976: 163.

Dostoevsky, should now make sense in theory (insofar as the analysis of Chapters 6 and 7 was perspicacious, it should already have been justified in practice).

7. Conclusion

The second main question I asked at the beginning of Chapter 8 was that of *why* Dostoevsky establishes this relationship with the *Sturm und Drang* at all. Why does he rehabilitate the theme of caprice as a response to nihilism? Of course, there is no reason to expect in advance that there is any meaningful answer to this question; Dostoevsky may simply have made a thematic choice based on his own interests, without having any grand purpose in mind. In fact, however, I would argue there is a more interesting answer, and one, moreover, that is crucial to understanding Dostoevsky's polemical intent in *Notes from Underground*. The materials of this solution have been gathered in previous chapters and in the historical surveys above; as we have seen, Byronism coloured the way in which Russian writers reacted to the decline of German Idealist philosophy and its solution to the problem of nihilism and human dignity. The disillusionment caused by this decline was, in the first instance, embodied in post-Byronic characters like Herzen's Bel'tov and the other "superfluous men" — morally and socially harmful, but completely ineffective and thus, politically, quite innocuous. Russian Nihilism was premised on the assumption that "Oblomovitis" was the logical conclusion of this trend. The Underground Man, though he shares many characteristics with his literary predecessors, represents an attack on this assumption; here the distinction between spleen and caprice is significant. Pushkin's Onegin, like his Faust, suffers from a chronic boredom and indifference; Turgenev's "Hamlets" wallow in uncertainty and self-loathing; Oblomov vegetates in a state of anxious dissociation; but the Underground Man represents storm and stress, caprice; he may be a "Hamlet" as well, but of one thing he has no doubt: that he would rather live in hell than capitulate to the Crystal Palace.

In Chapter 10, I shall assemble these ingredients to reach a final conclusion on the problem of understanding Dostoevsky's polemic in *Notes from Underground*. I shall first move on to outline the immediate polemical background for the *Notes*, before, finally, proceeding to reconstruct Dostoevsky's argument against Nihilist utopian socialism and its place in his *pochvennichestvo* social philosophy.

Chapter 10: A Realistic Utopia

1. The New People

Battered by disappointments and the apparently unstoppable advance of natural science upon the higher strata of human culture (whether religious, aesthetic or political), idealistic romanticism had given way first to the mockery of Byronism and then of post-Byronic realism. Romanticism had become a dead weight on Russian society, even in the eyes of its former adherents; they sought to replace it with an ideology of action and practical results.¹ The German “materialism controversy” spilled directly into Russia, where radicals like Chernyshevsky, Dobrolyubov and Pisarev embraced the materialist teachings of Büchner and others, along with the moral and political views that naturally accompany such notions of humanity.² The Young Hegelians and the French utopian socialists and positivists continued to influence the Russian desire for social and political criticism and progress.³ In general, by the 1860s the radical vanguard of social and political philosophy was dominated by faith in the power of science to explain and guide human life, and the rejection of all traditional values that could not be explained and obtained scientifically—in other words, it was dominated by nihilism, indeed, by those who openly accepted the designation of Nihilism.

Two of the most important documents leading up to Dostoevsky’s engagement with this phenomenon in *Notes from Underground* are Turgenev’s *Fathers and Children* and Chernyshevsky’s *What is to Be Done?*, published in 1862 and ‘63 respectively). Together, these novels served to establish the Nihilist as a literary and cultural type in the early 1860s. The former was Turgenev’s attempt to understand the “new people”

¹ As we saw in Section 5 of Chapter 8, above.

² Woehrlin, 1971: 127. As Scanlan writes: “The German materialists were the Diderot and Holbach of the delayed Russian Enlightenment, and Büchner’s famous *Force and Matter* was its *Encyclopédie*” (Scanlan, 1970: 69).

³ Paperno, 1988: 60-68; Terras, 1974: 69-76; Kelly, 2016: 478-482; Woehrlin, 1971: 122.

heralded by the likes of Chernyshevsky, and especially to understand their interactions with the older generation of Westernized intellectuals, including Turgenev himself, who upheld the ideals of civilization and progress but were unwilling to make such a radical break with traditional values as the Nihilists demanded.⁴ Dostoevsky would take up the same theme more directly in *Demons* and *The Adolescent*, both of which address intergenerational relations in the third quarter of the nineteenth century;⁵ in *Notes from Underground*, however, he turns his attention to the ideology of Nihilism itself, and explores its philosophical, political and psychological dimensions. In this respect he engages much more directly with *What Is to Be Done?*, which was in turn a response to the largely unflattering portrait of Nihilism in *Fathers and Children*.⁶ Here I will briefly consider the polemical significance of these two novels, to round off the historical outline of Russian literature leading up to *Notes from Underground*, and set the scene for my final reconstruction of Dostoevsky's polemical contribution.

1.1. Bazarov

Turgenev's *Fathers and Children* follows the interactions of two young nihilists, Bazarov and his protégé Arkady Nikolaevich, with two members of the older generation, Arkady's father and his uncle, Pavel Petrovich. Arkady and his father are both rather good-natured and do not clash violently over differences of opinion.⁷ Bazarov and Pavel Petrovich, however, become enemies. The latter simply cannot understand how the destruction of art, culture and love itself can be considered progress. "We act on the basis of what we recognize as useful," Bazarov replies. "Nowadays the most useful thing of all is rejection—we reject."⁸ Turgenev's depiction of the "nihilist" Bazarov caused a great deal of controversy, with many young intellectuals feeling that

⁴ Berlin, 2013: 317.

⁵ Dostoevsky, 2008, 2003(c).

⁶ Peace, 2010: 125, 133.

⁷ For example, Arkady merely attempts to re-educate his father by swapping his volume of Pushkin, "with an expression of such tender compassion," for Büchner's *Force and Matter*, leaving Nikolai Petrovich bemused and dejected (Turgenev, 2009: 37).

⁸ Turgenev, 2009: 40.

Turgenev had caricatured and attacked their aspirations.⁹ The radical Dmitry Pisarev, however, took a bolder approach and claimed Bazarov as a hero and role-model.¹⁰

Pisarev recognized in Bazarov a force for the regeneration and advancement of Russian society. Although he thinks that Bazarov is carried away to unnecessary extremes in his rejection of certain harmless pleasures (such as the enjoyment of nature, which Pisarev regards as a perfectly legitimate means of relaxing in between shifts of work¹¹), he does not accuse Turgenev of caricature but praises him for recognizing that, for young Russians, the time is right for extreme measures to be taken. Pisarev claims that the history of philosophy is replete with various idealisms and corresponding disillusionments—“fresh hopes and fresh disappointments”—and argues that this cycle will only come to an end when all ideals are recognized as delusions, and humanity limits its aspirations to realities;¹² this is where he thinks Bazarov leads the way. “What is to be done?” Pisarev asks, and finds the answer in Bazarov’s uncompromising realism: “We must live while we are alive, eat dry bread if there is no roast beef, know many women if it is not possible to love a woman, and, in general, we must not dream about orange trees and palms, when underfoot are snowdrifts and the cold tundra.”¹³

In fact, despite its radicalism Pisarev’s anti-idealism draws on the arguments that the older generation of disillusioned idealists had used in mockery of itself. “When our grandfathers amused themselves with Martinism, Masonry, or Voltairism,” he writes, “when our fathers consoled themselves with romanticism, Byronism, or Hegelianism, they were like youths who try desperately to convince themselves that they feel an irresistible need to smoke a strong cigarette after dinner.”¹⁴ The need for an “ideal” had always been legitimate insofar as it had stemmed from a legitimate *boredom*, but

⁹ Berlin, 2013: 322; Peace, 2010: 123.

¹⁰ In Turgenev, 2009: 193-215. See Frank, 1986: 173-176.

¹¹ Turgenev, 2009: 205.

¹² Edie et al., 1965: 72.

¹³ In Turgenev, 2009: 214f.

¹⁴ Edie et al., 1965: 79.

its particular outlet—the “isms” of Western philosophy—never had anything to do with “the organic needs of the Russian people” but only with fashion.¹⁵ They thus caused a rupture between wholesome nature and unhealthy artifice, and led to such phenomena as the “superfluous man” and other retrograde tendencies in the Russian intellectual.

Just like the romantics of the previous generation, then, Pisarev bemoans the separation of intellect and feeling, the lack of harmony in modern individuals. And he regards this precisely as a romantic malaise, afflicting the older generation but not the “new people,” the Nihilists.¹⁶ As far as he is concerned, though, the solution is obvious and simple: internal discord arises only because many people tend to acquire artificial needs that set them at odds against their *real* needs. As such, we should simply decide to respect only those needs which can be founded in the needs of our organism or given a physiological justification; if we cannot expect the human organism to benefit from a certain course of action, we should abandon that course as ephemeral and dangerous.¹⁷ In practice, this means abandoning all that the romantics and idealists of earlier generations held dear, and contenting oneself with animal pleasures, material possessions, and realistic political goals. As soon as this is achieved, however, the spell of the superfluous man will be broken and the post-Byronic malaise afflicting Russian society will dissipate. Nikolai Strakhov pointed out in Dostoevsky’s journal *Time* that in his craving for meaningful activity, Bazarov is merely “a direct and immediate imitator of Onegin, Pechorin, Rudin, and Lavretsky.”¹⁸ In Bazarov this craving is finally satisfied quite simply because he has managed to change the direction of his striving from unrealistic to realistic goals.

¹⁵ In *What is to Be Done?*, Chernyshevsky also extols “the great importance of distinguishing real desires, which seek and find their own fulfilment, from phantasmic desires, which can’t be fulfilled and don’t need to be, like a false thirst during a fever, which admits only one satisfaction, curing the organism, whose diseased condition engenders those phantasmic desires through a distortion of real ones” (Chernyshevsky, 1989: 180).

¹⁶ Edie et al., 1965: 97ff.

¹⁷ Edie et al., 1965: 87f.

¹⁸ In Turgenev, 2009: 222. Lavretsky is another “superfluous man,” the hero of Turgenev’s *Home of the Gentry* (Turgenev, 1970).

1.2. What is To Be Done?

Chernyshevsky's novel was designed to illustrate this new attitude. The main characters are temperamentally suited to the Nihilist way of life, and have little trouble subordinating their aspirations to the ruthless utilitarianism it demands. Chernyshevsky thus includes another, far less heroic character, as a more tangible and familiar example of practical realism. Marya Aleksevna, mother of the novel's heroine, represents the possibility of a correct attitude in a completely *ordinary*, indeed suboptimal person—she is ignorant, prejudiced and incapable of contributing positively to her daughter's life or to society, but nevertheless possessed of a single-mindedness that Chernyshevsky asks his readers to admire. He admits that "the inevitable result of every human being's frailty" is a division of thoughts and feelings into the categories of realism and idealism (of course, the more sensible a person is, the more the former will predominate in his or her aspirations), but argues that even the most limited person should be capable of holding the latter in check. As an example, he describes Marya Aleksevna's considerations on how best to deal with her daughter's elopement; as is usually the case, he writes, her thoughts are divided between one "real" and various "ideal" plans for action. The latter involve, for instance, "a parental curse [...] followed by an explanation that such a malediction was so powerful that even the earth, as everyone knows, refuses to receive the remains of children cursed by their parents"; this plan might afford her temporary satisfaction, but it would be extravagant and counterproductive. The former plan, "much less elevated," involves capitulating to the facts, however unpleasant, and discovering how best to turn a bad situation to her advantage.¹⁹

This novel, as stated, can be seen as the most immediate stimulus for *Notes from Underground*, and it will be worth considering the ways in which Dostoevsky engages with it directly before turning to consider his central argument against Nihilist utopian socialism itself. As we have seen, Dostoevsky argues with his opponents on two main fronts: he attacks their doctrines directly, and he attacks their representation of

¹⁹ Chernyshevsky, 1989: 163.

the psychological and social impact of believing in these doctrines. Where he does the latter, he embodies the psychological consequences of believing in Nihilist doctrines in the Underground Man; in such cases, Dostoevsky is typically satirizing the characters of Chernyshevsky's novel.²⁰ Chernyshevsky's Nihilists are swift, bold and decisive, but the Underground Man is the opposite to a comical degree; far from having been emboldened and strengthened by the doctrines of modern philosophy, he has been weakened and corrupted. For Chernyshevsky, Marya Aleksevna's virtue lies in the fact that, despite succumbing to the allure of "ideal" reflections, she does not linger on them but rather allows the "real" to predominate and decide her actions: "It's a great quality, Marya Aleksevna, to be able to recognize an impossibility!" She knew that her "ideal" courses of action were doomed to fail, and "had the good sense and courage to submit to the inevitable without causing useless harm to yourself and to others."²¹ The Underground Man, of course, takes an approach diametrically opposed to the one recommended by Chernyshevsky: when *he* wishes to take revenge on the officer who insulted him, he wallows for several *years* in a "stinking mess consisting of doubts, anxieties, and, finally, spittle showered upon it by the spontaneous men of action who stand by solemnly as judges and arbiters, roaring with laughter until their sides split."²² He is fully aware of the absurdity of his behaviour, and agrees unreservedly with Chernyshevsky's warning that such "endless, solitary reflections" achieve nothing of any value at all.²³ He simply cannot, and does not want to change his ways; the foundations of his personality have been infected with fear and uncertainty provoked by the philosophy of nihilism. Dostoevsky also parodies Chernyshevsky's hero Lopukhov, who refuses on principle to make way for high-ranking dignitaries on the street, by allowing the Underground Man to avenge himself by bumping rudely into his enemy on his holiday promenade.²⁴ Lopukhov hurls a gentleman into the mud, then condescends to pick him back up and dust him off; after

²⁰ Frank, 1986: 313.

²¹ Chernyshevsky, 1989: 168.

²² Dostoevsky, 2001: 8f.

²³ Chernyshevsky, 1989: 163.

²⁴ Dostoevsky, 2001: 37; Chernyshevsky, 1989: 209.

countless failed attempts, the puny Underground Man finally makes contact and ricochets off his adversary, who fails to notice his existence!

When the Underground Man discusses topics such as free will, rationality and egoism, he is engaging directly with existing Nihilist journalism, as well as Chernyshevsky's philosophical essays and the dialogues on these themes in *What is To Be Done?*²⁵ The blunt approach taken by the Nihilists made that of the Underground Man possible. In declaring openly that the ideals of former generations were completely worthless because they were unrealistic, and that only a fool or a lunatic would knowingly pursue them, they may have underestimated the extent to which their opponents had already outdone them; after all, it was the Byronists and their realist successors, including Herzen, Turgenev and Dostoevsky, who first mocked the delusions of idealism and recognized its untenability. The Nihilists argued that the continued obstinacy of idealism was empty rhetoric. "It is only against theory," Pisarev writes,

that materialism is waging a struggle; in practical life we are all materialists and are always at odds with our theories. The whole difference between the idealist and the materialist in practical life is that to the former the ideal is a standing reproach and a constant nightmare, while the latter feels at liberty and in the right so long as he is not doing actual evil to anyone.²⁶

The notion that the unrealizable ideal can become a "standing reproach and constant nightmare" would, however, have resonated with many of Pisarev's opponents; above we saw that the idealistic interlocutor in Herzen's *From the Other Shore* was under no illusion that suffering would be his lot in life.²⁷ "Lord," Gogol's Piskaryov exclaims, "what a life we lead! Our dreams are constantly at war with reality!"²⁸ More generally, as we know, this theme had been entirely commonplace since Byron had perfected the notion of the hero suffering under the weight of his own intellectual

²⁵ Chernyshevsky, 1955; 1989: 163.

²⁶ Edie et al., 1965: 71.

²⁷ Herzen, 1979: 20.

²⁸ Gogol, 1995: 21.

superiority. Dostoevsky merely continues this tradition in *Notes from Underground*, in which—as we saw in Chapter 5—the Underground Man is only too willing to sacrifice “normal advantage” on the altar of his ideals, knowing full well that no good will come of it.

Whilst they might agree with Pisarev that his advice is the key to internal harmony and happiness, those idealists will not be swayed who, like the Underground Man, have already decided to forgo happiness in the name of their ideals. For the Nihilists, it is simply a matter of learning to profit from the “school of life,” discarding the unrealistic dreams of childhood and learning to make the most of the world’s opportunities. But as Carlyle said of Faust, “disappointment, which fronts him on every hand, rather maddens than instructs.”²⁹ The idealist is unwilling to accept happiness on these terms. Conversely, realists like Pisarev are hardly likely to see the—not to say *appeal*, but *dignity* of idealism, when its dire personal consequences are admitted even by the idealists themselves. Jacobi may have been naive when he asked the intellectuals of the Enlightenment to relinquish their commitment to reason; the Nihilists are no less naive in asking their nineteenth-century successors to relinquish their spiritual needs: “There are few nervous disorders more recalcitrant than idealism,” Herzen said.³⁰

The Underground Man has cut off the possibility of a Nihilist rejoinder, because he has already conceded to them their most powerful argument—namely, that idealism is counterproductive and tends to detract from the material well-being of the idealist. Such concessions are indeed the Underground Man’s best weapon against the Nihilists, who depend crucially on the assumption that all humans seek their own advantage, and only go astray out of ignorance of the best way to obtain it. The Underground Man shows through his own behaviour that the contrary is the case, that it is entirely possible for people to act deliberately against their own advantage, because they value certain ideals more highly than any material goods. Thus far he is in

²⁹ Carlyle, 1908: 289.

³⁰ Herzen, 1979: 73.

agreement with traditional notions of idealism, and could expect to garner sympathy—if not approval—from progressive intellectuals like Herzen and Turgenev. The Underground Man goes much further than this, however. He even grants to the Nihilists that idealism has made him a bad person; that it has not only been a source of suffering, but moral and psychological corruption. As Chernyshevsky says to his readers in the preface of *What Is to Be Done?*: “You are so impotent and spiteful, all because of the extraordinary quantity of nonsense stuffed between your two ears”³¹—in other words, because of your unrealistic notions and aspirations. The Underground Man’s opening statements concede to Chernyshevsky that he *is* impotent and spiteful, and even agree that the cause of his malevolence is his idealism, his “heightened consciousness of the sublime and beautiful.” Here the Underground Man must lose the sympathy of traditional idealists, who might sacrifice material, but not *moral* or *spiritual* goods in the name of their ideals. In this respect, Dostoevsky draws on the theme of spiteful, Byronic disillusionment in the tradition of Pushkin’s Faust and Lermontov’s *Hero of Our Time*. But, crucially, he also returns to the characteristic psychological insight of the *Sturm und Drang*, the idea of all-destructive caprice; in this respect he goes beyond the Byronic and “superfluous man” traditions in Russian literature, and introduces a more volatile ingredient into his psychology of disillusionment. This, as I have stated, is the key to Dostoevsky’s argument against Nihilist utopian socialism, which I shall now turn to explicate.

2. The Argument Against Utopian Socialism

In Part 1, I argued against what I called the libertarian interpretation of Dostoevsky’s polemic in *Notes from Underground*, the interpretation that understands Dostoevsky’s problem with utopian socialism as a product of his commitment to the protection of *freedom*. I distinguished three varieties of freedom as a means of clarifying this issue:

³¹ Chernyshevsky, 1989: 48.

liberty, caprice, and moral autonomy. I agreed with Frank that the Underground Man is intended as a psychological indictment of utopian socialism, and, along with other proponents of the libertarian interpretation, identified the Underground Man's caprice as the element of his character that renders him most unfit for membership in a utopian society. In his caprice he illustrates the psychological dangers of believing in the doctrines of utopian socialism. Although I preserved the basic framework of this interpretation, however, I argued that the problematic aspect of these doctrines cannot be their incompatibility with liberty. I pointed out that if the Underground Man's caprice is indeed a product of the frustration of his need for liberty, it is no less of a problem for Dostoevsky's Christian utopianism than it is for utopian socialism: both involve the curtailment of liberty. I thus proposed that there must be some other psychological explanation for this caprice if Dostoevsky's social philosophy as a whole is not to be entirely incoherent. In Chapters 3 and 4, I sought the basis for such an explanation in criticizing the libertarian readings of Frank and Scanlan and in examining the Underground Man's own deliberations. The conclusion of Part 1 was that an explanation of the Underground Man's caprice should be sought in his romantic idealism, in his "heightened consciousness of the sublime and beautiful," rather than the utopian socialist doctrines alone. I argued that rather than being a reaction to the threat posed to his liberty by Chernyshevsky's utopian socialism, his caprice is a reaction to the humiliation of his idealism by its nihilism.

In order to understand the puzzle of *why* an idealistic admirer of "the sublime and beautiful" should precisely become *capricious* in response to the nihilistic frustration of his ideals, I turned in Part 2 to the essays of Schiller, in which, fortuitously, I found an explanation of this phenomenon involving the concepts of sublimity and human dignity. According to this explanation, caprice is not merely a backlash against the curtailment of liberty, like the "convulsions" of the convicts referred to by Jackson but, considered in all its details and rendered into a coherent theory, a much more complicated phenomenon. For Schiller, human beings have two aspects, a physical aspect and a sublime or spiritual aspect; the spiritual aspect is absolutely free, and it

feels compelled to use its absolute freedom to formulate ideals; it measures itself and the rest of reality against these ideals; finally, if it finds that reality falls below its ideals (i.e. if its ideals are not realizable), it will feel that its freedom has been frustrated and has no outlet, and the individual will become capricious. To be capricious is to attempt to “give one’s individuality unlimited extension,” to demand that one be as free in reality as one is in one’s own imagination, and that reality therefore should conform to one’s every whim.

According to Schiller, in brief, anyone who is aroused by the sublime to find confirmation of human dignity in the realization of ideals discovered in the exercise of absolute spiritual freedom will become capricious if the realization of these ideals is frustrated. As we saw in Part 1, this is precisely the situation of the Underground Man. I found further illustrations of this theory in the literary works of the *Sturm und Drang* movement, and considered *The Robbers* and *Faust* in particular. Comparing them to *Notes from Underground* revealed important similarities: in all of these works, nihilism is responsible for the disillusionment of idealistic heroes, and these heroes become capricious in response to this disillusionment in the manner described in Schiller’s essays. Dostoevsky does not advance anything like this explanation explicitly, but he does prime the reader to search for *some* such explanation of the Underground Man’s caprice, and develops his character in a manner strikingly reminiscent, in certain crucial respects, of the *Sturm und Drang* heroes created by or alluded to by Schiller.

In general, the “underground psychology” is illuminated by these investigations. It became clear throughout Part 1 of the dissertation that the Underground Man’s caprice is caused and provoked by the conflict between his rationalism and his romantic idealism. This conflict causes him to become inert by undermining his confidence that anything it is possible to do or devote himself to is worthy of respect. His reason tells him, for example, that he would only be happy and contented as a “glutton and a sluggard,” but his idealism rejects this prospect as a degrading waste of his abilities; thus he does nothing and becomes nothing, because he sees no prospects of doing anything better. In the same way his idealism leads him to spurn the Crystal Palace

ideal as being little better than a chicken coop, but his rationalism leads him to deny that anything better will ever be attainable. Thus he merely vacillates and remains uncommitted:

The final result, gentlemen, is that it's better to do nothing! Conscious inertia is better! And so, long live the underground! Even though I said that I envy the normal man to the point of exasperation, I still wouldn't want to be him in the circumstances in which I see him (although I still won't keep from envying him. No, no, in any case the underground is more advantageous!) At least there one can... Hey, but I'm lying once again! I'm lying because I know myself as surely as two times two, that it isn't really the underground that's better, but something different, altogether different, something that I long for, but I'll never be able to find! To hell with the underground!³²

This vacillating inertia is a simple consequence of his recognition that, given his dual commitments to be reasonable and to accept nothing less than fulfilment of his highest ideals, there is nothing he can do and nothing he can expect to happen that will ever satisfy him, that he will never be able to attain that "something altogether different" whose absence alone he can perceive. Thus it is a state of constant disappointment and disillusionment with both himself and his surroundings. His caprice is in turn the consequence of this nihilistic disillusionment. It is an explosion of pent up idealism, of a longing for *dignified* activity that is constantly frustrated and stifled. The absolute freedom of his imagination, which has been wasted on what, as a reasonable "man of the nineteenth century," he can only regard as impossible delusions, demands an outlet, and, because it is absolute, will accept no check on its authority. This is why the mechanistic rationalism of the Crystal Palace provokes his rage; it disillusion him and stimulates his caprice by reminding him of the futility of anything better than a chicken coop, of the embarrassing limits of human endeavour, and it rankles him with its compendium of hypothetical imperatives, of recommendations for the best way of satisfying every desire and obtaining every "normal advantage." Such

³² Dostoevsky, 2001: 25.

good sense is completely intolerable for a capricious individual who thinks of morality and reason themselves as a prison, and, as Karl Moor dashes himself against the intractable pillars of divine and human justice, he would rather go mad than be tempted to live a life of such sensible satisfaction.

By considering the literary and philosophical developments separating Dostoevsky from the writers of the *Sturm und Drang*, I then showed that this association of nihilism, disillusionment and caprice was characteristic of these writers in particular, and that intervening writers took a markedly different approach to the theme of disillusionment; we saw that the Underground Man's main Russian predecessors belonged to the Byronic tradition in which disillusionment is associated with the spleen, spite, and inertia of figures like Manfred and Cain rather than the wild caprice of Karl Moor and Faust; the Byronic characters tend to withdraw into themselves in response to disillusionment, while the *Stürmer und Dränger* refuse to accept defeat and attempt to impose themselves further on the outside world. Although the Underground Man clearly possesses Byronic characteristics as well, his tendency towards and advocacy of caprice links him securely to the *Sturm und Drang* tradition; and since his caprice is the linchpin of Dostoevsky's polemic against utopian socialism, it is thus to this tradition that we have been led. Taken together, all of these considerations provide strong evidence for thinking that Dostoevsky intended *Notes from Underground* to be a revival of the uniquely *Sturm und Drang* reaction to nihilism, and drew upon writers like Schiller and Goethe in developing his attack on Chernyshevsky's Nihilist utopian socialism.

So, whereas scholars seeking to understand the social-philosophical argument in *Notes from Underground* have focused on utopian socialism itself and on the Underground Man's reactions to it, they have thereby overlooked what I take to be the key to Dostoevsky's intentions, namely, the place of the *Notes* in the wider history of literature and ideas. They have overlooked the fact that Dostoevsky's polemic relies upon themes that are not at all contemporaneous with Dostoevsky or Chernyshevsky, but stem from almost a century earlier in Germany. Having thoroughly investigated

these themes, we have been able to understand, firstly, why Dostoevsky saw a connection between the utopian socialist ideology and the dangerous capriciousness of the Underground Man, and, secondly, why he would have thought to appeal to this connection in particular in his polemical response to Chernyshevsky.

With respect to the first point, we have observed that Dostoevsky—along with the bulk of his readership—was intimately familiar with the *Sturm und Drang* reaction to the nihilism of the Enlightenment, and that he was therefore easily able to perceive in it an argument against the nihilism of his own utopian socialist opponents. With respect to the second point, the historical observations of preceding chapters are highly pertinent. The dominant mode of disillusionment in nineteenth-century Russian literature belonged, as we have seen, to the legacy of Byron. As stated, the Nihilists thus assumed that the idealists who resisted their goals were toothless—“superfluous men” and “Hamlets” who clung to their ideals out of weakness, complacency or indecision. Such an assumption was, it must be said, supported by the literature of the day. We considered several characters of this type in the previous chapter. To the Nihilists, therefore, those who stood against progress were merely the outdated remnants of the older generation; they posed no real threat and could simply be ignored. Dobrolyubov envisaged them as workshy moralists who had climbed up trees to escape the swamp below, pontificating to those working to improve the environment, and only becoming alarmed when their own supports were being cut down for timber.³³ “Oblomovitis” was the final expression of this phenomenon, the end result of the useless idealism of the past.

But Dostoevsky perceived in the heroes of Schiller and Goethe—heroes who were still fresh in the Russian mind, despite their older vintage—a different psychology of disillusionment, and one that made the prospects of utopian socialism far less certain. If the socialists were intent on reviving the nihilism of the Enlightenment, Dostoevsky implies, they must beware of reviving the rebellious opposition that emerged in the

³³ Matlaw, 1976: 162.

eighteenth century as its natural concomitant. If the psychological insights of the *Sturm und Drang* are correct, the Underground Man's capricious rage is a predictable consequence of any philosophy which undermines human dignity by undermining the realizability of the ideals which that dignity depends on. As such, Dostoevsky would have us believe, utopian socialism will predictably undermine its own ends by promoting a capricious attitude towards life that is diametrically opposed to the rational utilitarian calculations their utopian model depends upon. The morose and splenetic Byronic characters of the post-romantic period will, with the return of radical nihilism, give way to individuals who resemble the *Stürmer und Dränger* in their uncompromising opposition to order and rationality.

This, then, is Dostoevsky's argument against Nihilist utopian socialism in *Notes from Underground*. In what follows, I shall elaborate more fully on the details of this polemic, address residual problems, and finally consider the manner in which it—unlike the libertarian interpretation of it—coheres with Dostoevsky's Christian utopianism and secures the overall unity of his social-philosophical thought in *Notes from Underground* and related texts.

3. Idealism and Nihilism

First we should take stock and note that despite their constituting an argument against nihilism and Nihilist utopian socialism, nihilism on its own does not seem to be the problem illustrated by the *Sturm und Drang* and *Notes from Underground*. Rather, it is the tug-of-war between idealism and nihilism which, for Karl Moor, Faust, and the Underground Man, sparks the problem of caprice. Idealism leads them to expect too much from the world; and nihilism convinces them that they are wrong to do so. But if nihilism only leads to disillusionment and caprice if it coupled with idealism, then what threat does the Underground Man really pose to the Nihilists? They can adopt the Underground Man as an illustration of everything that was wrong with the

idealistic older generation, and of the pressing need for “new people” untainted by the prejudices and outmoded sensibilities of romanticism. Such people would presumably not suffer any ill effects from believing in nihilism, because they would not be wedded to any of the old ideas that make nihilism unpalatable.

This problem is extremely pressing. Dostoevsky himself specifies that the Underground Man is a necessary product of his society and culture.³⁴ But the society he represents must be Dostoevsky’s own generation, which was formed by romantic literature in the 1830s, and then, under the auspices of figures like Herzen and Belinsky, came in the 1840s to deride its former idealistic romanticism for its lack of engagement with real-world problems. How then can the Underground Man serve as a living psychological indictment of utopian socialism in the 1860s, as Frank maintains, and as I have also argued? The Nihilists can surely agree that the Underground Man is a child of his time; the culture of which he is a product is precisely that which they want to overthrow as quickly as possible.

The solution to this puzzle is to accept that the Underground Man is a product not only of Nihilism or of idealism: he is a product of both. As such, his character is an argument against both. Dostoevsky uses him to indict not only Nihilism, which the Underground Man has come to accept as an adult, but the idealism of his youth as well, and, moreover, to suggest by this dilemma the way forward towards a third alternative that avoids the dangerous extremes of both.³⁵ It is worth dwelling on the details of this explanation, since it is clearly pivotal to the polemical goals of *Notes from Underground*.

We have seen that German romanticism emerged from post-Kantian philosophy as a response to nihilism, and, as far as its advocates were concerned, had succeeded in reconciling the opposition between spirit and matter that had given rise to the

³⁴ Dostoevsky, 2001: 3n.

³⁵ Some scholars have recognized that *Notes from Underground* is a double polemic against 1840s romanticism and 1860s nihilism, but have not, in my view, succeeded in binding these two polemical strands together (Peace, 1971: 7; Kirk, 1974: 20; Leatherbarrow, 1981: 63).

problem of human dignity throughout the history of Western philosophy, and had thereby quashed nihilism at its source. The romantic reconciliation of spirit and matter finally lost its appeal, however, with the fall of Hegel's philosophy. Intellectuals in Germany and Russia began at this time to resent the social and political impotence of post-Kantian philosophy, which they regarded as excessively abstract and rarefied. The Russian intelligentsia, which had been languishing under the oppressive regime of Tsar Nicholas I, was especially anxious to shed the otherworldly concerns of romanticism and German Idealism and to devote itself to the improvement of the nation. Drawing on Byronic themes of disillusionment and despair, Russian realist writers in the 1840s and '50s reacted to this period of transition by developing the type of the superfluous man, who represented the despondency of a generation whose romantic sensibilities had, it now seemed, rendered them unable to address the real political and economic problems of the era, and whose desire for active progress was not supported by strength of will or practical abilities.

In the 1860s, Nihilism emerged as a direct response to the perceived impotence and stagnation of the previous generation of radicals. Its answer was simple: if the idealism of the older generation had rendered it unfit for useful activity, then idealism should be jettisoned. The Nihilists thus argued that metaphysics was a waste of time, that humanity's spiritual needs were not genuine needs at all, and that people simply needed to be educated to live in accordance with a "scientific" theory of human happiness. Following in the footsteps of the *philosophes*, the Young Hegelians and the French utopian socialists, as we have seen, the Nihilists thought that in this way they could liberate society from its self-destructive malaise. Dostoevsky agreed with them that modern society was subject to this malaise—the Underground Man, as its most highly developed representative, was their common enemy—but he was convinced that the Nihilists' efforts were totally misguided and self-defeating. In common with other Russian intellectuals at the time, *including* his utopian socialist opponents, Dostoevsky deplored the otherworldliness and impotence of the romantic idealism he had been enamoured with in his youth: *pochvennicheskoto* was a philosophy of action,

progress and tangible results; it accused the Slavophiles of closing their eyes to possibilities of the future, and clinging to the past.³⁶ No less than the Nihilists, he could have agreed with Feuerbach that philosophy needed “to come down from its divine and self-sufficient blissfulness in thought and open its eyes to human misery.”³⁷ But if the idealism of the early nineteenth century was problematic, it would nevertheless be necessary to replace it with something that would serve to fulfil the same psychological and spiritual role—fulfil the same spiritual needs, confirm the same human dignity—and not simply deny the importance of this role. It is on this supposition that Dostoevsky’s attack on Nihilist utopian socialism depends, and from this that his *pochvennichestvo* draws support.

Unlike the utopian socialists, then, he did not believe that idealism could simply be dismissed, or that the spiritual needs of humanity could simply be denied, or that the traditional conception of human dignity could simply be abandoned; he believed that fulfilment of these needs and confirmation of this dignity would always be necessary, and that provision must be made for them in any vision of the perfect society. As he wrote in his notebooks, the socialists “anticipated that there would be objections: that man is not willing to sacrifice so much—so they plunged right into nihilism and began to deny man: feeling, soul, religiousness, art, freedom, everything.”³⁸ By incorporating this nihilism into their social philosophy the utopian socialists merely denied the facts of human psychology, and founded their social vision on an impoverished and distorted representation of real human beings—theirs is an idea that “could apply only to man as a beast,” as Dostoevsky writes of Satan’s suggestion that Christ should feed himself—and, by implication, humanity—by transforming stones into bread.³⁹

³⁶ As Grigoryev put it, Slavophilism was “not a national movement, but only an ancient-boyar one” (Grigoryev, 1962: 154).

³⁷ Feuerbach, 2012: 175.

³⁸ Dostoevsky, 1973: 69.

³⁹ In a letter to V. A. Alekseyev dated June 7, 1876 (Dostoevsky, 1987: 420f.). The Biblical reference is to Matthew 4:1-4, which itself refers to Deuteronomy 8:3.

But human beings are not merely beasts, and “do not live by bread alone.” Dostoevsky thus continues:

And if, beside bread, man is not possessed of a spiritual life, and ideal of Beauty, he will languish and die, go insane, kill himself, or abandon himself to pagan fantasies. And since Christ carried the ideal of Beauty in Himself and His Word, He decided that it was better to inculcate in the soul of man the ideal of Beauty; bearing it in their souls, all men would become brothers and then, of course, they would work for one another and would all be rich. Whereas, if they are given bread, they will become enemies to one another out of sheer boredom. But what if they are given both Beauty and Bread at the same time? Then man would be deprived of *labor*, of *individuality*, of the opportunity to *sacrifice his goods for the sake of his neighbor*—in a word, he would be deprived of life as such, the ideal of life. And therefore, it is best to do only one thing: to proclaim the spiritual ideal.⁴⁰

What then of the “new people” of the Nihilists, the generation untainted by romanticism, and thus supposedly immune to the conflict between idealism and nihilism that drove the *Stürmer und Dränger* and the Underground Man to caprice? *Notes from Underground* allows the reader to deduce that although people like the Underground Man illustrate the worst possible degree of caprice, because they are simultaneously influenced by idealism and nihilism (see Chapter 7, Section 3, above), caprice is a problem *not only* for such divided people—it is also a problem for those who profess either idealism or nihilism in isolation, and thus a problem for the Nihilists, whose “new people,” despite being free from the influence of *doctrinaire* idealism, must nevertheless feel the pull of the spiritual needs, a kind of natural and innate idealism striving for confirmation of human dignity. No one can be relied upon to subsist in the belief that human dignity conceived as sublimity is a delusion, and that human beings are merely animals without a higher spiritual calling—“he will languish and

⁴⁰ Dostoevsky, 1987: 421. Note that Dostoevsky does not think that humanity should be actively deprived of bread, but only that it should cooperate to procure its own bread having accepted the moral ideal of Christ—at which point, as he writes, “they would work for one another and would all be rich.” The moral ideal must come first, as the only adequate foundation of merely animal satisfactions.

die, go insane, kill himself, or abandon himself to pagan fantasies.” Thus Franz Moor, the avowed nihilist, baulks no less than his brother Karl at the thought of his own insignificance and subservience to natural forces beyond his control—he too is unable to reconcile himself with the implications of nihilism for human dignity (although, not being an idealist, he is less disillusioned and his reaction is less extreme). The “new people,” Dostoevsky also implies, will find themselves in the same position—no matter how far they distance themselves from the dreamy idealism of the older generation, they will find that “man does not live by bread alone,” and that some provision must be made for the fulfilment of spiritual as well as corporeal needs.

Far from leaping from romantic idealism to Nihilism, from one extreme to the other, it would thus be necessary to adopt a *realistic idealism* that could actually fulfil, and not merely arouse the spiritual needs of humanity as the dreamy idealism of the past had done. In Chapter 8, we saw that this was the aim of the romanticism that emerged alongside German Idealist philosophy; if realism is concern for the needs of the body and intellect, and idealism is concern for the spirit and “higher” cultural forms like art and religion, then this romanticism was an attempt to show that the two need not be thought of as incompatible, as they had been by the reductive materialist philosophers of the Enlightenment. The philosophies of Schelling and Hegel were designed to reconcile the ideal and the real, to interpret the material world in such a way as to accommodate the ideals of freedom, love, and so on, and thereby to solve the problem of human dignity that troubled the philosophers of the Enlightenment. Schelling looked primarily to natural science as a means of uncovering traces of the ideal in reality; Hegel looked primarily to human history. Despite their stated intention of reconciling the concrete and the abstract, however, the leading theories of German Idealism came to be seen as empty abstractions themselves.⁴¹ Romantics like Friedrich

⁴¹ As we saw in Section 5 of Chapter 8, above.

Schlegel continued to profess philosophies of reconciliation,⁴² but by the middle of the nineteenth century, as we have seen, the scales tipped back in favour of realism.⁴³

Pochvennichestvo can be seen as a revival and continuation of the romantic project. The Slavophiles and the Westernizers were regarded by Dostoevsky as idealists and realists respectively, each emphasizing one aspect of human life and failing to achieve a balance between them. The Westernizers, he says in a journal article, wanted to understand everything using pure intellect, on which course they “went too far” and turned to reductive realism, unlike the Slavophiles who didn’t even want to understand anything and clung dogmatically to old forms. Of the Slavophiles he writes that “what they lack is life. They have no feeling for reality. Idealism stupefies, fascinates and —kills.”⁴⁴ As an attempt to mediate between these two positions, *pochvennichestvo* maintains that both realism and idealism on their own are misguided: both parties were guilty of going to extremes, one of paying too little heed to the spiritual needs of the Russian people, the other of ignoring its economic, political and social needs.

If he believed that the Slavophiles and Westernizers could be reconciled in *pochvennichestvo*, however, the Nihilists were another matter. The central tenet of all nihilism is an explicit denial of the need to placate the inclination towards idealism. The *Sturm und Drang* movement was not at bottom a reaction to realism or a realistic approach to humanity’s physical needs, but a reaction to the failure of the Enlightenment to reconcile this realism with idealism; it was indeed a reaction to nihilism, which denies the need for any such reconciliation because it rejects idealism entirely. The same can be said of *Notes from Underground*, which reacts not against the Westernizers or the Slavophiles per se, but against the Nihilists whose commitment to realism *at the expense of idealism* exposes them once again to the problem of caprice.

Dostoevsky thus achieves three polemical goals with the Underground Man: he illustrates the psychological dangers of both idealism and nihilism, and, in revealing the

⁴² E.g. Schlegel, 1847.

⁴³ Beiser, 2016.

⁴⁴ Dostoevsky, 1964: 221.

shortcomings of both, adumbrates his Christian alternative—his solution to the conflict between realism and idealism. In order to clarify residual obscurities, I would argue that Dostoevsky's solution must be thought of as having two dialectical components, which it will be well to consider explicitly: on the one hand, he takes nature at face value; on the other hand, he upholds ideals which are not incompatible with nature taken at face value. Dostoevsky does not explicitly endorse these statements, but they can, I think, be deduced from what he has written, and it is important to elaborate on them as a way of revealing the overall cogency of his stated opinions. In order to understand these components, it is useful to develop Dostoevsky's ideas in comparison with those of romanticism and nihilism.

3.1. Taking Nature at Face Value

As stated, Dostoevsky's solution first involves taking nature at *face value*.⁴⁵ By this I mean that in his attitude towards nature and natural science he does not superimpose an ideological lens; he does not attempt to extract from or impose upon natural science or our everyday contact with nature anything that is not explicitly contained within them. In this respect he is to be distinguished from both romantics and nihilists, who, understood in a somewhat simplistic fashion,⁴⁶ both approach natural phenomena with ideological agendas: either to use them as evidence of some immanent divinity, blurring the boundary between natural and supernatural, or, on the contrary, use them as evidence for the impossibility of values like free will and altruism. Both parties extrapolate from the findings of natural science in accordance with a set of theoretical presuppositions, and thereby depart from what I am calling "nature taken at face value." Another way of putting this is to say that Dostoevsky, unlike romantics and nihilists, accepts that the study of nature should be fundamentally *a posteriori*

⁴⁵ Here "nature" refers to *reality* or *the physical universe* in general, and not merely to "the natural environment."

⁴⁶ In this section, the "romantics" and "nihilists" I refer to are admittedly caricatures; although I do refer to actual thinkers as illustrations, I assume that most or all had somewhat more nuanced views.

rather than guided by *a priori* philosophical considerations pertaining to romantic or nihilist worldviews.

Chernyshevsky's *Anthropological Principle in Philosophy* may be taken as an example of the nihilistic approach; it is laden with scientifically unsupported transitions from physics and chemistry to human psychology, agency and morality.⁴⁷ I would therefore dispute Richard Peace's claim that, for Chernyshevsky, "[t]he world around us is exactly what everyone sees."⁴⁸ Despite the great progress made by science in the intervening years, Chernyshevsky really has no more strictly scientific grounds for maintaining his nihilistic philosophy of human life than did *philosophes* like the Baron d'Holbach in the previous century.

It is not the science appealed to by Chernyshevsky and other nihilists but this nihilistic extrapolation from science that Dostoevsky rejects. Darwinism is a useful illustration. The majority of radicals embraced Darwinism as a means of showing that traditional Christian doctrine was false, since humans descended from other animals rather than a special act of creation, and that the traditional notion of human dignity was therefore spurious.⁴⁹ Thus the Underground Man mentions the fact that "it's from a monkey that you're descended" as one of his hated "laws of nature"—he evidently regards it as an unpalatable proposition.⁵⁰ Dostoevsky recognized, however, that the theory of evolution did not on its own invalidate the Christian appraisal of human

⁴⁷ "This rambling stroll through current ideas about the natural world had one overarching purpose: to build by analogy logical bridges from the, by now accepted, 'tight' knowledge that science had produced about such phenomena as the chemical reactions involved in metallurgy to the still disputed, 'looser' speculation about causality versus free will in human behavior" (Bethea and Thorstenson, 2016: 38).

⁴⁸ Peace, 2010: 118.

⁴⁹ Rogers, 1974: 491, 493. As a matter of fact Chernyshevsky was, as Rogers notes, alone among prominent radicals in *rejecting* Darwinism (though his views on the matter were not made public until 1888) because it conflicted with his principle that human beings should exist in a state of cooperation, not competition, and he worried that it might sanction a callous and genocidal social Darwinism. Ironically, though he was thus in agreement with Dostoevsky about the misappropriation of Darwinism by social and political thinkers, Dostoevsky was more consistent in realizing that it would not be reasonable to reject Darwinism simply because of the ideological use to which it might be put.

⁵⁰ Dostoevsky, 2001: 10.

dignity, even if it was in tension with certain Christian doctrines. On this matter we may consult the “science expert” of *pochvennichestvo* and of Dostoevsky’s journals, Nikolai Strakhov.⁵¹ As a disciple of Schellingian *Naturphilosophie*, Strakhov could embrace evolutionary theory as a description of the progressive development of natural forms towards perfection; but he took issue with the application of moral and philosophical principles derived from Darwinism to humanity. Significantly, he refused to allow it to undermine the moral and spiritual distinction between humans and the rest of nature, since he regarded the preservation of human dignity (which is a quality inaccessible to science) as non-negotiable.⁵² Dostoevsky agreed with this assessment: “it does not really matter what man’s origins are,” he writes in a letter.⁵³ “Evolution as such was not a stumbling block. As Dostoevsky saw it, all that mattered was the breath of God—whether we come from a lump of clay, Adam’s rib, or monkeys was immaterial.”⁵⁴ He was opposed to “social Darwinism” and the appropriation of evolutionary theory for nihilistic ends, but, because he was not morally or spiritually invested in any particular scientific claims about the natural universe, he was able to allow to science itself a high degree of autonomy.⁵⁵

The same cannot be said of romanticism. Friedrich Schlegel, for example, regards nature as “the visible veil of the invisible world, covered all over and richly ornamented with significant symbols and hieroglyphs”⁵⁶—nature is not merely natural, but is imbued with supernatural significance. “Beneath the vast tombstone of the visible world,” he writes, “there slumbers a soul, not wholly alien, but more than half akin to our own.”⁵⁷ It is the task of philosophy, art and religion to interpret the “hieroglyphs” of nature, discover its hidden meanings, and thus to commune with the soul that gives it life. In the same vein, Schelling wrote that “nature is a poem lying pent

⁵¹ Frank, 1986: 209f.

⁵² Rogers, 1974: 498.

⁵³ Dostoevsky, 1987: 420.

⁵⁴ Knapp, 2016: 63.

⁵⁵ Katz, 1988: 68.

⁵⁶ Schlegel, 1847: 140.

⁵⁷ Schlegel, 1847: 86.

in a mysterious and wonderful script"⁵⁸ and Novalis that "[t]he world must be romanticized. [...] When I give the commonplace a higher meaning, the customary a mysterious appearance, the known the dignity of the unknown, the finite the illusion of the infinite, I romanticize it."⁵⁹

In accordance with this conception of nature, Schlegel takes for granted that various natural occurrences are caused by demonic interference; "accordingly," he writes approvingly, "some have supposed the monkey tribe not to be an original creation of the Deity, but a satanic device and malicious parody upon man."⁶⁰ Holding such an opinion of monkeys would no doubt leave a person vulnerable to serious disillusionment by Darwin's theory of evolution. Schlegel's belief in the supernatural emergence of various harmful organisms is more generally in tension with modern science. His nineteenth-century English translator, A. J. W. Morrison, is quick to point out that the scientific theory upon which Schlegel's belief rests—the theory of "spontaneous generation," according to which, for instance, maggots arise spontaneously in rotting meat, and swarms of locusts arise spontaneously out of air that has been "corrupted"—has been disproven and superseded.⁶¹ This in turn casts serious doubt on Schlegel's claim that such phenomena as maggots and locusts betray the direct interference of evil spirits, who also plague the earth with "serpents and snakes" just as, in his view, certain diseases engender the production of intestinal worms in the bowels of human beings.⁶² Although the falsity of spontaneous generation does not in itself disprove the existence of evil spirits, it does undermine Schlegel's argument for the existence of such beings. If the only good reason to believe in the devil is the existence of spontaneously generated swarms of locusts, then, since there are no such swarms, we should not believe in the devil. It would perhaps have been better for

⁵⁸ Schelling, 1978: 232.

⁵⁹ Beiser, 1996: 85.

⁶⁰ Schlegel, 1847: 123.

⁶¹ Schlegel, 1847: 121n. Morrison cites the 1836 experiment of Franz Ferdinand Schulze. In fact, scientific controversy surrounding spontaneous generation continued into the late nineteenth century; so, though correct, Morrison's censure of Schlegel was somewhat premature.

⁶² Schlegel, 1847: 123.

Schlegel to adopt the approach of Strakhov and Dostoevsky, who also believe in at least one supernatural entity, God, but do not base this belief on any doctrinaire interpretation of specific natural phenomena.⁶³

So, the first component of Dostoevsky's solution to the problem of caprice—though it is only implicit in his characterization of both nihilism and romanticism as causes of the Underground Man's caprice—is to reject both nihilistic and romantic approaches to nature and natural science, and to take nature at face value: to avoid making speculative claims about nature that everyday experience or progress in natural science could potentially refute, and to avoid "romanticizing" as Novalis recommends—that is, superimposing upon reality what is at bottom a comforting veneer of fiction that makes the unrealistic appear realistic. The purpose of this component is to ensure that it is possible to formulate ideals that are not unrealizable, and thus to ensure that one can pursue an ideal without necessarily being disillusioned.

Anyone who has a nihilistic conception of nature will be disillusioned because, understood this way, nature is incompatible with all ideals worthy of the name: no moral ideals dependent upon the possibility of moral responsibility, altruism, or love, for example, could be regarded as realizable. Anyone who has a romantic conception of nature will likewise be disillusioned. Understood romantically as a "veil of the invisible world, covered all over and richly ornamented with significant symbols and hieroglyphs," nature is not indeed incompatible with traditional moral and spiritual ideals; however, since it is in itself unrealistic, any ideals formed on the basis of a romantic worldview are liable to be unrealizable, and so lead to disillusionment. Thus the Underground Man is disillusioned because his lofty ideals of moral conduct were devised in complete abstraction from the realities of his mundane existence, by people who were not interested in devising viable moral ideals for the ordinary inhabitants of Saint Petersburg, the "city where everyone is a civil servant, a shopkeeper, or a

⁶³ Of course, whether their belief can or should be rationally justified in some other way is another matter entirely.

German craftsman.”⁶⁴ They can only be regarded as realizable relative to a glorified version of reality, different in substance but not in kind from Schlegel’s view of nature as a “veil of the invisible world.” Thus army officers will not agree to fight duels with him, because he is an insignificant office clerk, and because the officers he runs into are not of the dashing and heroic kind depicted by Pushkin and Lermontov, but petty and self-satisfied like Gogol’s Lieutenant Pirogov.

3.2. Realistic Idealism

This brings us to the second component of Dostoevsky’s solution: he upholds ideals which are not incompatible with nature taken at face value; that is to say, he maintains what might be called a realistic idealism. In this respect he may be contrasted with both nihilists and romantics yet again. He disagrees with the nihilists insofar as he upholds any ideals at all; nihilism, as we have seen, is incompatible with all ideals worthy of the name. And he disagrees with the romantics insofar as the ideals he upholds are realizable relative to nature taken at face value. The lofty ideals of the romantics can only be thought of as realizable if nature is taken, not at face value, but instead as a blend of fact and fiction, or as a “veil of the invisible world” which blurs the distinction between natural and miraculous. It is because they maintain an unrealistic interpretation of natural phenomena that romantics can regard supernatural or overly lofty ideals as legitimate. Relative to an everyday or scientific conception of nature, however, such ideals are unrealizable.

We may take the case of Faust as an illustration. For the nihilist, Faust’s ideal of knowing the absolute is entirely misguided, because there is no such absolute and consequently no hope of knowing it; for the romantic, it is not misguided because knowledge of the absolute is not impossible.⁶⁵ For Dostoevsky (as perhaps for Goethe), it is misguided because—though there may or may not be an absolute to be known—

⁶⁴ Gogol, 1995: 9.

⁶⁵ This is not to say that a romantic reader would necessarily approve of the methods and actions of Goethe’s Faust, but only of his aspirations.

human beings are not suited to such supernatural endeavours and should set their sights on more realistic ideals. He agrees with the romantics that human beings possess a unique spiritual freedom, but maintains that this freedom is not best employed in abandoning the natural order in favour of any transcendent “Ideas of reason,” or in penetrating deeper into it by means of any “intellectual intuition” or insight into its “significant symbols and hieroglyphs.” So, while Dostoevsky’s “face value” conception of nature, like that of the nihilists, cannot accommodate the overly lofty ideals of the romantics, it *can*, perhaps, accommodate at least some ideals worthy of the name.

Such ideals must be lofty enough to provide confirmation of human dignity—to elevate human beings above everything animal, base and contemptible in the universe—but not so lofty as to be entirely unrealistic. Dostoevsky’s ideals are, of course, provided by the example of Christ and, in particular, his selfless love, his altruism, his sacrifice, which, though they are ideals worthy of our sublimity, are not supernatural—that is, they do not require transcendence over nature taken at face value, but are obtainable for real human beings in the real world. The ideals represented by Christ thus provide a genuine outlet for the absolute freedom of the human spirit, which, in taking them as satisfaction for its spiritual needs and as confirmation of human dignity, need not fear the indignity of spiritual frustration suffered by romantic idealists like Karl Moor or the Underground Man.

This positive alternative to the ideals of the Underground Man is only adumbrated in the first part of *Notes from Underground*, since Dostoevsky’s allusions to Christianity were interfered with by the censor; in the second part, however, they are illustrated concretely in the character of the prostitute Liza. After availing himself of her services, the Underground Man mercilessly schools Liza about her degraded condition and lack of prospects; succeeding where Gogol’s Piskaryov failed, he overcomes her reticence and convinces her to visit him, casts himself as her noble redeemer, and, in general, exercises power over her emotions in order to recover from the indignity of his dinner with Zverkov. When Liza actually arrives at the Underground Man’s

apartment some days later, he is caught completely off guard; she sees him in his dirty dressing gown, shouting at his insubordinate servant, "behaving like a mangy, shaggy mongrel, attacking his own lackey, while that lackey stood there laughing at me!"⁶⁶ The Underground Man is once again caught in a situation humiliating to his inflated sense of self-worth. Unable on this occasion to redeem his image, he heaps abuse on Liza and reveals that he never had any intention of helping her, that he had only been toying with her. After a long and agonizing tirade, however, the Underground Man is once again caught completely off guard by Liza's reaction:

I'd become so accustomed to inventing and imagining everything according to books and picturing everything on earth to myself just as I'd conceived it in my dreams, that at first I couldn't even comprehend the meaning of this strange occurrence. But here's what happened: Liza, insulted and crushed by me, understood much more than I'd imagined. She understood out of all this what a woman always understands first of all, if she sincerely loves—namely, that I myself was unhappy. [...] Suddenly she jumped up from the chair with a kind of uncontrollable impulse, and leaning toward me, but being too timid and not daring to stir from her place, she extended her arms in my direction.... At this moment my heart leapt inside me, too. Then suddenly she threw herself at me, put her arms around my neck, and burst into tears. I, too, couldn't restrain myself and sobbed as I'd never done before.⁶⁷

Once again, though, his "overwrought brain" triumphs over all his emotional needs and his good inclinations; having exposed his weakness to Liza, his pride is wounded: "our roles were completely reversed. Now she was the heroine, and I was the same sort of humiliated and oppressed creature she'd been in front of me that evening [in the brothel]." ⁶⁸ To regain control, he takes advantage of her sexually and, when she leaves in a state of dejection, presses five roubles into her hand to humiliate her as fully as possible.

⁶⁶ Dostoevsky, 2001: 86.

⁶⁷ Dostoevsky, 2001: 86f.

⁶⁸ Dostoevsky, 2001: 87.

In this concluding episode of *Notes from Underground*, Liza perfectly illustrates the ideal of selfless and altruistic love described by Dostoevsky in *Winter Notes*. She forgets herself, despite her own suffering and the cruelty of her erstwhile saviour, and sees only that the Underground Man is suffering; she sees that his abuse and his insults are indications of his own misery and degradation, and instead of taking offence she comforts him. In doing so she embodies the ideal of altruism associated with Christ, and presents the Underground Man—and the reader—with a real, concrete alternative to both the “crystal palaces” and the delusions “in the style of Manfred” of Chernyshevsky and the Underground Man, the nihilist and the romantic idealist. Christian love is the solution to the impasse reached by the rationalism of the Nihilists and the dogged irrationalism of the Underground Man.⁶⁹

The Underground Man was searching for confirmation of human dignity in grand gestures, “sublime and beautiful” adventures, dreams of Byronic superiority—in the lofty ideals of romanticism. His idealism was therefore frustrated, because—given his own humiliating circumstances, and all the more so given his nihilistic philosophy—he perceived that his ideals were unrealizable. This is why he became disillusioned and, in accordance with Dostoevsky’s *Sturm und Drang* psychology, capricious. As a solution to this problem, Dostoevsky demands that the romantic idealists of his generation change their understanding of what it takes for an idea to be an ideal worthy of the name. The romantic Underground Man fails to recognize Dostoevsky’s Christian ideal of love—even when it is illustrated before his eyes by the selfless concern of Liza—because it does not fall within the range of what he would consider spiritually satisfying: it is not “sublime and beautiful” enough, it offends his self-esteem because he does not recognize it as an expression of true human dignity. He was, as he said, too “accustomed to inventing and imagining everything according to books and picturing everything on earth to myself just as I’d conceived it in my dreams.” Nevertheless, though the Underground Man does not quite admit it, Dostoevsky plainly intends for us to see that the ideal embodied by Liza *would* satisfy the spiritual needs

⁶⁹ Jackson, 1984.

which incline him towards romanticism and which prevent him from coming to terms with nihilism.⁷⁰

* * *

In sum, nihilists deny the viability of all ideals, and romantics, on the other hand, will only countenance overly lofty ideals that are viable only in relation to their unrealistic conception of reality. In both cases, whatever ideals are formulated, they will likely be perceived to be unrealizable, and the spiritual freedom exercised in formulating them will be frustrated, leading to *Sturm und Drang* reaction and caprice. Dostoevsky upholds an alternative ideal that can be realized in nature taken at face value. This then is the second component of Dostoevsky's positive alternative to nihilism and romantic idealism.

Taken together, the two components ensure that one's ideals harmonize with one's conception of reality, and that one's conception of reality is generally accurate, such that one's ideals can be said to harmonize with reality, that is, to be realizable. Dostoevsky takes nature at face value and rejects supernatural ideals, thereby protecting himself from investment in ideals which are unrealizable. His own Christian ideals provide genuine satisfaction for the spiritual aspect of humanity, thereby preserving human dignity and avoiding the problem of caprice. The challenge faced by people like the Underground Man is to reorient their values in this direction; *Notes from Underground* does not offer a consoling solution to this problem, but implies that Dostoevsky's readers must learn to accept the ideal of altruism despite the appeal of the romanticism with which they were inculcated. They must outgrow their romantic idealism, and they must not lapse into nihilism but embrace an alternative, realistic, Christian idealism.

⁷⁰ Frank, 1986: 341, 344f.

4. Conclusion

Finally, we can also see that this explanation of Dostoevsky's polemic does not suffer from the internal contradiction which led us to suspect the standard libertarian explanation of being inadequate. The latter fails because it locates the cause of the Underground Man's caprice in something Dostoevsky's own utopian ideal shares with that of the socialists, namely, the sacrifice of individual liberties. If liberty was so important as to preclude the possibility of a rationally ordered socialist utopia, then it must also preclude the possibility of a utopia founded on self-abnegation and altruism. These values, though they are expressions of the variety of freedom I called moral autonomy, stand nevertheless in tension with liberty because a perfectly altruistic person would need to curtail his or her liberties for the benefit of others. Dostoevsky's problem with utopian socialism cannot, therefore, consist in the socialist attitude towards individual liberties.

This deduction was confirmed by careful examination of *Notes from Underground* itself. We have seen that, for Dostoevsky, Chernyshevsky's utopian socialism will fail, not because of any threat it poses to liberty, but because of its nihilistic attack on human dignity. Because it flatly rejects the traditional conception of human dignity, nihilism comes into conflict with the spiritual needs of humanity. Since, Dostoevsky believes, these needs are an ineliminable feature of human psychology, they cannot be obviated simply through promoting a "new people" unstained by romanticism; on the contrary, their satisfaction is fundamental to the mental health of all individuals. Its absence leads to disillusionment—not Byronic spleen and "superfluous man" dejection but, according to Dostoevsky's *Sturm und Drang* psychology, to a much more dangerous variety. In *Notes from Underground* as in works like *The Robbers* and *Faust*, disillusionment is associated with *caprice*, the longing for absolutely unfettered willfulness, free even from the constraints of reason and morality, as if the freedom of the imagination should become extended over reality. This is what the Underground Man calls the "most advantageous advantage," the impossible prize for which he will—so he claims—sacrifice everything else. Thanks to his unrivalled devotion to

both romanticism and nihilistic rationalism, the Underground Man is merely an extreme example of this tendency.⁷¹ To a lesser degree but on a much wider scale, Dostoevsky implies, disillusionment and caprice will be the inevitable consequence of a nihilistic socialist utopia. The Christian utopia of Dostoevsky's *pochvennichestvo* does not, on the other hand, depend upon any ideals which cannot be realized in nature taken at face value; the acceptance of the ideal of Christ as fulfilment of one's spiritual needs will not therefore lead to disillusionment, or to the problem of caprice faced by nihilists and romantics alike. Dostoevsky argues that a society founded on a mutual striving towards the Christian moral ideal would fulfil the spiritual needs of humanity and, crucially, thereby avoid the problem of caprice illustrated in *Notes from Underground*.

Whereas the libertarian interpretation leads to a contradiction between Dostoevsky's argument against utopian socialism and his own utopianism, therefore, the interpretation advanced here is able to reconcile these two strands of his social philosophy in *Notes from Underground*. All things considered, it thus has several advantages that commend it over the libertarian reading: it is justified with reference to the wider history of ideas and the literary tradition in which Dostoevsky was working; it is justified with reference to *Notes from Underground* itself; it makes sense of Dostoevsky's polemic; it does not render Dostoevsky's social philosophy contradictory.

What are the implications of this reinterpretation of *Notes from Underground*? Although the unifying interest of this dissertation has been the relatively narrow central aim of understanding the polemic against utopian socialism in the *Notes*, in pursuit of this goal significant conclusions have been reached about three other important aspects of Dostoevsky's work: first, the idea of the "underground" itself, which Dostoevsky—the "poet of the underground"—evidently regarded as one of his foremost achievements;⁷² second, Dostoevsky's contribution to "superfluous man" tradition in

⁷¹ Dostoevsky, 2001: 91.

⁷² See the epigraph (Dostoevsky, 1969: 426).

Russian literature from Pushkin onwards; third, Dostoevsky's attitude towards "freedom" in politics.

With respect to the first point, we have advanced significantly from the idea that the underground psychology is a simple consequence of believing in (or emotionally resisting but feeling unable to refute) determinism. Dostoevsky took pride in his psychological insights into the "underground" — "it is my glory," he wrote in unpublished notes pertaining to *The Adolescent*, "for that's where the truth lies."⁷³ It is evidently important to comprehend this theme, both for the understanding of Dostoevsky's psychological insights and the foundations of his social and political philosophy. In his notebook, Dostoevsky is extremely brief and says little of his great discovery that could not equally be said of Turgenev's superfluous men, for instance; but he clearly states that the reason for the phenomenon of "the underground" is the loss of belief in general principles, the idea that "*nothing is sacred*."⁷⁴ This point, though highly general, has been confirmed in relation to the Underground Man: his overall condition can be traced to the influence of nihilism, the destruction of his cherished ideals. Through examining the Underground Man in relation to the *Sturm und Drang*, we have gained a much clearer picture of the mechanism by which Dostoevsky imagined this "nothing is sacred" to contribute to the disease of the underground in the case of the *Notes*. Whether or not Dostoevsky's conception of the "underground" or of its social and political implications changed over time is a matter for further research. The term itself occurs infrequently, for example in *The Eternal Husband*, where, however, none of the characters precisely resemble the Underground Man, and there is no hint of an argument against utopian socialism.⁷⁵ It is likely then that the psychology of *Notes from Underground* cannot simply be transferred to other "underground" characters, or used as a simple key for making sense of Dostoevsky's

⁷³ Dostoevsky, 1969: 426.

⁷⁴ Dostoevsky, 1969: 426.

⁷⁵ Dostoevsky, 2000: 150f.

other books. But to have understood the nature and genesis of the character of the original Underground Man himself is surely a good place to start.

With respect to the second point, Dostoevsky's contribution to Russian literature, we have seen that although Dostoevsky continued the post-Byronic tradition of the "Hamlet" and the "superfluous man," he reinvigorated it by reconnecting it with its roots in the *Sturm und Drang* tradition and the problem of human dignity which motivated it. Beyond the self-mockery of the generation whose romantic predilections had become obsolete and "superfluous" to the needs of the nation, *Notes from Underground* speaks urgently of the needs of the spirit, and attempts to prove to the Nihilists that the phenomenon of the dejected intellectual is not wholly innocuous; such characters will not simply fade into the past, to be replaced by "new people" with strong wills and useful inclinations. On the contrary, to the extent that Nihilism succeeds in its aim of banishing idealism from the intelligentsia, Dostoevsky implies, so will the Turgenevian Hamlets and the Oblomovs be replaced by Underground Men with a very different cast of mind. For the Nihilists, "Oblomovitis" was merely an inconvenience. The capricious Underground Man, and the *Sturm und Drang* attitude towards nihilism that he represents, is another matter entirely. Like the "odd fellow" in *Winter Notes*, who refuses to go along with the socialist project even though it is in his best interests, the Underground Man is a real spanner in the works: "the socialist can only spit and tell him he is a fool, an immature adolescent who doesn't understand what is good for him."⁷⁶ And yet, as the Underground Man says, he will not listen to reason, because he is *capricious* and regards reason as a constraint on his will, and would prefer not to understand what is good for him, because if he did then he would be tempted to limit himself to doing only what is good for him: "How about it, gentlemen, what if we knock over all this rationalism with one swift kick for the sole purpose of sending all these logarithms to hell, so that once again we can live according to our own stupid will!"⁷⁷ According to the interpretation offered in this thesis, then,

⁷⁶ Dostoevsky, 1988(a): 51.

⁷⁷ Dostoevsky, 2001: 18f.

Dostoevsky's chief contribution to the superfluous man tradition in Russian literature is to attempt to give the type a polemical bite, and to force the Nihilists to recognize in the disillusionment and self-mockery of the older generation a force to be reckoned with: the spiritual needs of humanity, which cannot simply be ignored, even if the romantic older generation itself did not know how best to fulfil them.

With respect to the third point, Dostoevsky's attitude towards freedom, we have seen that any appraisal of the theme of freedom in Dostoevsky must respect the ambiguity of "freedom" and related terms. It is simply not possible to say, for example, that Dostoevsky championed the cause of freedom against utopian socialism, without being clear about which kind of freedom is at issue. Dostoevsky makes few concessions to his readers, and relies upon them to unravel his meanings themselves. The three varieties of freedom I identified in Dostoevsky's work—liberty, moral autonomy, and caprice—are indeed so different from one another that no ambiguous statement of the importance of "freedom" for Dostoevsky can avoid falling into contradictions. That "Dostoevsky cared about freedom" is true; but the sense in which it is true may be diametrically opposed to the sense in which many critics have intended it. It is clear enough that Dostoevsky regards moral autonomy as vitally important, but this says little about his attitude towards what we would normally think of as freedom, namely, liberty, the absence of constraints on our actions; indeed, moral autonomy can be enjoyed in the complete absence of liberty, as for example in prison, or under an autocratic regime, and perfect moral autonomy—perfect altruism—even requires complete disregard for liberty. Dostoevsky thus emerges from his argument against utopian socialism as a far more deliberately *illiberal* figure than his opponents, who wanted to *liberate* humanity from precisely the kind of self-abnegating moralism that Dostoevsky regards as indispensable to genuine freedom. Caprice, on the other hand, is incompatible with both liberty and moral autonomy, since a capricious individual will be unable to endure the self-control demanded by the latter, and will regard the political structures necessary for the protection of liberty as intolerable constraints. Bearing this in mind, it is no longer possible to say that Dostoevsky agrees with his

Underground Man *at all* about the importance of freedom, for the kinds of freedom they care about have nothing whatsoever in common. Disambiguating the term “freedom” was thus essential to grasping the social-philosophical meaning of *Notes from Underground*, and should lay the foundations for any future investigation into Dostoevsky’s political thought.

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